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THE LANDING AT LEYTE -- AFTER FIFTY YEARS.

by Daniel B. Schirmer

For one who would like to see U. S. relations with the Philippines democratic in form and content, the landing of General MacArthur at Leyte in October 1944 inspires feelings that are decidedly ambivalent. On the one hand the landing signifies the defeat of Japanese rule in the Philippines, and so can be seen as an important link in the global victory over the fascist axis. So much is positive.

But in moving from a consideration of the general, the global, meaning of the event to its more particular and local significance for the Philippine people, the picture becomes darker, more negative. Viewed from this standpoint the MacArthur landing bears a striking resemblance to an earlier U. S. military incursion in Philippine affairs, Admiral Dewey's entry into Manila Bay in 1898.

While Dewey's naval victory helped end Spanish domination of the Philippines, it opened the door to another colonial master, the United States. Similarly MacArthur's return made an end to Japanese rule, but brought in its train a renewal of U. S. dominance, although in an altered, neo-colonial form. For shortly after the defeat of the Japanese the U. S. government granted Philippine independence. Washington, however, at the same time took care to renew its alliance with the wealthy Philippine upper class who were to serve, as in former colonial times, as a conduit for heavy U. S. influence over Philippine life.

In establishing its colonial regime Washington had welcomed the cooperation of members of the Philippine elite who supported Spanish rule. Those Filipinos who had fought Spain and continued to resist U. S. domination it suppressed with U. S. troops.

Eventually the U. S. government also saw to the suppression of those former Philippine anti-Japanese guerrillas who rejected the new dispensation with arms in hand. But it did so in a neo-colonial manner, financing, arming and directing a Philippine army to do the job. Even before this, however, Washington encouraged the participation in the new Philippine government of influential Filipinos who had collaborated in the murderous rule of the Japanese fascists.

General Mac Arthur himself set the example in this last regard, placing Manuel Roxas, a key collaborator with the Japanese, on his military staff and giving him a prominence that led to his election to serve as the first president of the independent Philippines.

Characteristically one of the first acts of President Roxas, MacArthur's protege, was to grant the U. S. government military bases at Clark Air Field and Subic Bay, thus renewing Washington's ability to use the Philippines as a staging area for U. S. military intervention in the Asia-Pacific region, a prime service offered Washington by the former colonial regime.

So General MacArthur's landing led to a new form of U. S. predominance in Philippine life, a neo-colonial form, and this was to see its culmination in the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. It was a straight line from MacArthur's sponsorship of Roxas, the servitor of Japanese fascism, to the green light Nixon gave to Marcos' martial law dictatorship and Bush's blessing of the same.

What is there to celebrate about the landing of MacArthur fifty years ago? In my opinion it is in the fact that since that time the Philippine people seem to have grown stronger and more democratically self-assertive, capable of challenging what MacArthur stood for in relation to their country.

For starters, the Philippine people overthrew the Marcos dictatorship in a non-violent revolution, closing down the most extreme form of U. S. neo-colonial influence. Then they adopted a constitution that called in question two important features of U. S. domination as a military super-power, with the provisions against U. S. bases and nuclear weapons. Finally they topped all this off with the Senate vote to get rid of the bases.

This does not mean, of course, an end to U. S. imperial influence in Philippine affairs. For example, the Ramos government, as is well-known, has made an agreement with the Pentagon giving it access to Philippine ports, air fields, and military installations for use as interventionist staging areas. In this connection the proposal to bus U. S. troops, stopping over on their way to the Persian Gulf, from Manila to Olongapo and Angeles City for purposes of "rest and recreation"

shows that the past is still with us. It is clear that as long as there is an access agreement the Pentagon's sexual exploitation of impoverished Philippine women will continue. But the Philippine people are better equipped to make their life more democratic than they were in 1944. The events, the experience, of the past few years are irrefutable evidence of this. It is in this sense that the present anniversary gives inspiration to those possessed of a democratic bias.