

Soldiers of a forgotten empire: American memory and the battle for Filipino veterans' benefits

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More than a quarter million Filipino soldiers fought under American command during the Second World War, but the US Congress declared in 1946 that the vast majority would be ineligible to receive benefits under the GI Bill, a landmark piece of social legislation that provided financial and educational assistance to most veterans of the war. This article examines the contested politics of denying these benefits to veterans of the Philippine Commonwealth Army. It demonstrates how the US Federal Government's efforts to suppress its imperial past shaped military welfare policy in the post-war era.

KEYWORDS Veterans, Philippines, GI Bill, empire, United States Armed Forces of the Far East, USAFFE

Introduction

On 26 July 1941, fearing the imminent Japanese invasion of the Philippines, President Franklin Roosevelt issued an executive order that transferred the Philippine armed forces to the command of US General Douglas MacArthur. This new army, the United States Armed Forces of the Far East (USAFFFE), was created by merging a smaller US colonial force called the Philippine Scouts with the full army of the Commonwealth of the Philippines.¹ Over the course of the war, USAFFE soldiers fought vicious battles and were forced to endure unspeakable

¹ Michael A. Cabotaje, 'Equity Denied: Historical and Legal Analyses in Support of the Extension of US Veterans' Benefits to Filipino World War II Veterans,' *Asian Law Journal* 6 (1999), 67.

horrors, including the Bataan Death March in April 1942 after the successful Japanese invasion of the Philippine archipelago.²

When Japan surrendered on 15 August 1945, the status of these soldiers – more than a quarter million in total – remained in doubt. The end of the Second World War also meant that, after nearly fifty years of American colonial rule, the Philippines was to become a sovereign nation. As we will see, the US military and the Veterans Administration (VA) led Filipino soldiers to believe at the time that, because they were members of the US Armed Forces, they would qualify for American veterans' benefits, including the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 – better known as the GI Bill – a generous package of medical, housing, and education benefits.³ Yet in 1946, to the surprise of President Harry Truman himself, the US Congress passed the Rescission Acts, a pair of laws that declared most Filipino veterans ineligible.⁴ In an instant, they became 'impossible subjects:' colonial soldiers who fought under US command, but were denied the same rewards.⁵ Over the next six decades, a meagre share of the benefits that were once promised for service and sacrifice were reluctantly doled out by Washington to maintain Manila's Cold War allegiance and, later, because of domestic pressure from the growing political power of Filipino-Americans.

To be sure, Filipinos were not the only minority or ethnic group that was denied or discouraged from seeking the same rights and benefits afforded to white American veterans. Regimes in the Jim Crow South and some veterans' organisations also created administrative barriers that prevented many Black veterans and women from accessing the program.⁶ Gay veterans were explicitly barred from the GI Bill under a direct order from the VA that made any veteran discharged 'because of homosexual acts or tendencies' ineligible.⁷ Despite these obstacles, many veterans from marginalised communities were able to use their GI Bill benefits to gain the training and financial stability to emerge as activists, professionals, and politicians in the post-war era.⁸

² Christopher Capozzola, *Bound by War: How the United States and the Philippines Built America's First Pacific Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2020).

³ Suzanne Mettler, *Soldiers to Citizens: The G.I. Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁴ *Certain Service Deemed Not to be Active Service*, US Code 38 § 107(a) and 38 § 107(b).

⁵ Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁶ Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006); Oliver Burttin, 'Enforcing Conformity: Race in the American Legion, 1940–1960,' in *War Veterans and the World after 1945: Cold War Politics, Decolonization, Memory*, Angel Alcade and Xosé M. Núñez Seixas, eds, (London: Routledge, 2018); Molly Merryman, *Clipped Wings: The Rise and Fall of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) of World War II* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

⁷ Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 138.

⁸ Christopher S. Parker, *Fighting for Democracy: Black Veterans and the Struggle Against White Supremacy in the Postwar South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Simeon Man, *Soldiering Through Empire: Race and the Making of the Decolonizing Pacific* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

The near-universal eligibility of male veterans for these benefits (if only on paper) makes the exclusion of Filipinos even more notable. Why were these veterans, frequently lauded for their bravery, excluded from the generous welfare benefits given to other veterans? The answer is that Filipinos were subject to colonial laws that were designed to enforce racial hierarchies and delimit the core of the United States from its periphery.⁹ These institutions were notable, in the words of legal historian Sam Erman, for their ‘ambivalence, ambiguity, evasion, and inconsistency’.¹⁰ Consequently, Filipino veterans faced different challenges from other veterans of colour who were officially acknowledged as eligible. Over time, as the memory of American colonisation of the Philippines faded, Filipinos encountered policymakers who refused to understand why ‘foreign’ veterans would be eligible for US benefits.

In this article, I follow a call from Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela to highlight the role of imperial subjects pressed into service for the defence of imperial governments.¹¹ In a landmark work on Algerian veterans of the French military, Dónal Hassett describes the ‘post-war renegotiation of the social contract between the colonial state and those citizens and subjects who had fought to defend it’ as a process of ‘mobilizing memory’.¹² Veterans of the USAFFE had to mobilise memory, too. Caught between colony and metropole, Filipinos not only had to serve the imperial state, but had to remind that state continually of their service over the next sixty years.¹³ Scholarship on US veterans and the welfare state rarely mentions the experience of colonial veterans, yet an examination of Filipino veterans of the USAFFE offers an opportunity to examine how America’s denial of its imperial past affected the political efforts of Filipino veterans in demanding greater access to promised benefits.¹⁴

If Filipino veterans sought to mobilise memory, then key parts of the American state, such as leading members of Congress and the VA, actively worked to forget America’s colonial past and the men who once served in its army. The ambiguous status of colonial veterans allowed metropolitan officials to offer an evasive and inconsistent set of reasons for why they could not pay. As the coming sections will show, these ran from their ‘concern’ for the Philippine economy to a fear that the archipelago’s lower cost of living would provide Filipinos with a higher rate of compensation than Americans. These responses took advantage of legal ambiguity and the lack of domestic political pressure for the US to make good on its promises. To the extent that benefits were provided, they were through means-tested

⁹ Christina Duffy Burnett, ‘The Edges of Empire and the Limits of Sovereignty: American Guano Islands,’ *American Quarterly*, 57 (2005), 779–803.

¹⁰ Sam Erman, *Almost Citizens: Puerto Rico, the US Constitution, and Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 2–6; Katrina Quisumbing King, ‘The Political Uses of Ambiguity: Statecraft and US Empire in the Philippines, 1898–1946’ (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2018).

¹¹ Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela, eds, *Empires at War, 1911–1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3.

¹² Dónal Hassett, *Mobilizing Memory: The Great War and the Language of Politics in Colonial Algeria, 1918–39* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 5, 142.

¹³ Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 37.

¹⁴ Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019).

programmes that required individual veterans to provide proof of injury or loss.¹⁵ For their part, Filipino veterans argued they were due GI Bill benefits as soldiers who served under American command. Their benefits were earned as soldiers and could not be satisfied through foreign aid to the independent Republic of the Philippines.

I begin with a review of the politics of the Rescission Acts and Congress' intent in passing these laws. The second section considers the role of Cold War politics in structuring challenges to the Rescission Acts, and the third section explores how the fight was again reframed as a domestic battle over civil rights as Filipino immigrants gained greater political power. I conclude with some thoughts on what this case study reveals about the social welfare consequences of American exceptionalism, a narrative that denies the imperial past of the United States.¹⁶

The Rescission Acts and the denial of veterans' benefits

At the end of the Second World War, the political status of the Philippines was in flux. The passage of the Tydings-McDuffie Act in 1934 put the American colony on a ten-year path to full sovereignty, but this process was violently interrupted by the Japanese invasion in December 1941. Adding to this complexity was the fact that, just prior to the invasion, General MacArthur had committed to equalise the pay of Filipino and American soldiers, but he did so without the approval of the War Department or Congress. When MacArthur arrived to liberate the Philippines in 1945, he again ordered the equalisation of pay and benefits, but Congress, which was eager to end its responsibility for the Philippines, refused to appropriate these funds.¹⁷

Nevertheless, by the end of the war in 1945, veterans of the USAFFE had reasonable grounds for expecting to receive GI Bill benefits. The head of the VA had declared in May of 1942 that 'personnel of the organized military forces of the Government of the Commonwealth of the Philippines ordered into "the service of the armed forces of the United States" [...] are to be considered in the "active service" within the meaning of the term'.¹⁸ If Filipinos were considered active American military personnel, they would be due the same benefits as other US soldiers. Yet the decision to treat USAFFE veterans like other American veterans was an administrative ruling that was never approved by Congress.

The trouble in Congress began on 27 August 1945, less than two weeks after Japan's surrender, when Arizona Senator Carl Hayden requested a report on the

¹⁵ In this way, they resembled traditional American welfare benefits: Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

¹⁶ Paul A. Kramer, 'Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World,' *American Historical Review* 116 (2011), 1348–91.

¹⁷ Frank Hindman Golay, *Face of Empire: United States–Philippine Relations, 1898–1946* (Madison: University of Wisconsin–Madison, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Monograph Number 14, 1998), 464–9.

¹⁸ US Veterans Administration, *Decisions of the Administrator of Veterans' Affairs: March 1, 1931 – June 30, 1946* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1954), 725.

costs to fund the programme for Filipinos fully.¹⁹ Hayden, a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee and a master of Senate dealmaking, was widely considered to be among the most powerful Democrats in Washington. Although it is unclear why Hayden took particular interest in this matter, his concerns may have stemmed from his effort to direct post-war appropriations to massive water reclamation and transportation projects in the southwest.²⁰

The VA's new Administrator, General Omar Bradley, estimated if veterans of the USAFFE were included that would add 190,000 more soldiers to the ranks of US veterans who were already eligible, and might cost \$US3 billion over a period of seventy-five years, which was a comparatively small share of the \$US200 billion he thought was needed to fund benefits for all American veterans.²¹ This estimate led Hayden to reframe the issue as a debate over potential economic development aid to the soon-to-be sovereign Philippines, rather than one about benefits due to individual Filipino veterans. 'Three billion dollars is a substantial sum of money', he noted, 'and if Filipinos were eligible to receive it there would be good reason to reduce or eliminate other proposed expenditures by the United States for their benefit'.²² Whatever ambiguity remained about the intent of Congress was quickly cleared up with the passage of the Rescission Acts in February of 1946.

In exchange for an appropriation of \$US200 million to support the independent armed forces of the Philippines, Congress added a rider to the bill making veterans of the Philippine Commonwealth Army and guerrilla fighters ineligible for US veterans' benefits. More broadly, the bill declared that any service 'shall not be deemed to have been active military, naval, or air service for the purposes of any law of the United States conferring rights, privileges, or benefits upon any person by reason of the service of such person or the service of any other person in the Armed Forces'.²³ Although wounded veterans were granted pensions for service-connected disabilities, these were to be paid in pesos, rather than dollars, providing Filipinos with half of what their American comrades received.²⁴

What might have once been an obligation of the United States to provide promised benefits to veterans became an aid package to a foreign nation. Furthermore, in what would become a recurring theme, Hayden argued that such financial support would harm the Philippine economy and lead to a culture of dependency. 'What the Filipino veteran needs', he asserted, 'is steady employment rather than to depend for his living upon a monthly payment sent from the United States'.²⁵

¹⁹ Hayden's letter to Bradley is reprinted in US Congress, Senate, Committee on Appropriations, *Hearings on H.R. 5604*, 79th Cong., 2nd sess., 25 March 1946, 54.

²⁰ Jack L. August, *Vision in the Desert: Carl Hayden and Hydropolitics in the American Southwest* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1999), 153–5.

²¹ US Congress, Senate, Committee on Appropriations, *Hearings on H.R. 5604*, 54.

²² US Congress, Senate, Committee on Appropriations, *Second Supplemental Surplus Appropriation Rescission Bill*, 79th Cong. 2nd. sess., 1946, 57.

²³ First Supplemental Surplus Appropriation Rescission Act of 1946 (P.L. 79-301). The Second Supplemental Surplus Appropriation Rescission Act of 1946 (P.L. 79-391) removed eligibility for members of the New Philippine Scouts.

²⁴ Cabotaje, 79.

²⁵ US Congress, Senate, Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Deficiency, *Hearings on H.R. 5604*, 79th Cong., 2nd sess., 25 March 1946, 61.

In other words, benefits for individual Filipinos were less helpful than economic development projects funded through American aid dollars. Although Hayden was the most vocal proponent of the Acts, he had the full support of his colleagues. The bills passed both houses of Congress on a voice vote with little debate.²⁶ There was no appetite among members of Congress to spend money on Filipino veterans who would soon become citizens of a foreign nation.

Harry Truman, who had long been an active member of the American Legion, objected to Congress' actions. The President vetoed the first set of Rescission bills due to an issue unrelated to Filipino veterans, and Paul McNutt, the US Ambassador to the Philippines and a former national commander of the Legion, urged him to veto the revised acts based on his fear that they would hinder future diplomatic relations with Manila.²⁷ Yet even as Truman noted the 'moral obligation of the United States to look after the welfare of Philippine Army veterans', he signed them into law on 20 February 1946.²⁸ Truman likely realised that he could not counter congressional opposition, and the ad hoc committee he appointed to find a solution was never able to propose a compromise that Congress would support.²⁹

When the Philippines gained full independence just a few months later on 4 July 1946, the Rescission Acts presented an immediate political crisis for Philippine President Sergio Osmeña, who argued that \$US200 million was 'evidently inadequate' to cover pensions and other benefits due to Filipino veterans, which he calculated at more than \$US1 billion.³⁰ Carlos Romulo, a former aide to MacArthur who was now the resident commissioner of the Philippines in Washington, offered another objection to this compromise, claiming that it gave 'officials in Washington the opportunity to say that they have discharged their obligations to the Filipino veterans while in fact many major discriminations [...] remain'.³¹ The result, Romulo argued, would be to slap Filipino veterans with a 'badge of inferiority'.³²

Philippine officials, who were under intense domestic political pressure from veterans, continued to press the matter with little success. In 1948, the Mayor of Manila led a protest of USAFFE veterans to Malacañang Palace to urge the president to pressure Washington to give 'more privileges and rights to active and demobilized members of the force'.³³ Yet what was ultimately approved in July 1948

²⁶ US Congress, *Congressional Record*, 79th Cong., 2nd sess., 1946, vol. 92, pt. 1: 1153–4; Golay, 468–70.

²⁷ Golay, 468–70.

²⁸ Harry S. Truman, 'Statement by the President Concerning Provisions in Bill Affecting Philippine Army Veterans, 20 February 1946,' in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman*, (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1950), 124.

²⁹ Golay, 469.

³⁰ President S. Osmeña to Resident Commissioner C. P. Romulo, 12 February 1946, *Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines* <<https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1946/02/12/letter-written-by-president-osmeña-to-resident-commissioner-carlos-p-romulo-instructing-him-to-work-for-the-extension-of-the-full-benefits-of-the-g-i-bill-of-rights-to-filipino-war-veterans-februa/>> [accessed 12 December 2021].

³¹ Quoted in Capozzola, 189.

³² Quoted in Rick Baldoz, *The Third Asiatic Invasion: Empire and Migration in Filipino America, 1898–1946* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 232.

³³ 'PS to Stage Palace March Tomorrow,' *Manila Times*, 12 June 1948.

was modest. Congress appropriated \$US39 million to provide wounded veterans with hospitalisation benefits at a planned VA facility in Manila.³⁴

Critical press accounts of scandal and corruption in Manila may have contributed to Truman's reluctance to press Congress on the issue. In 1949, twenty-one employees of the Philippine government were accused of stealing VA cheques sent to Filipino veterans.³⁵ One year later, the *New York Times* reported that the Philippine president was 'charged with corruption and mismanagement', and, in a story published two months later, explained how 'the prevalence of corruption in the Government' was leading 'to a breakdown of morality among the people'.³⁶

More damaging, perhaps, was when Drew Pearson – a muckraking journalist whose syndicated column was carried by more than 600 newspapers – accused the VA of spending millions 'to finance immorality in the Philippine Islands'.³⁷ Resurrecting an old narrative about welfare dependency, he claimed that Filipino widows were living with married men and 'splitting their pensions with the men's wives'.³⁸ These pensions, Pearson argued, had created a system of taxpayer-financed moral corruption. He also noted, incorrectly, that 'all Filipino veterans automatically get the same benefits as U.S. veterans'.³⁹

But not everyone was unsupportive. USAFFE veterans did receive help from the American Legion, the powerful veterans' service organisation, many of whose members had deep-rooted memories of serving alongside Filipinos. In 1946, the Legion invited Philippine Resident Commissioner Carlos Romulo to its national convention in San Francisco where he spoke passionately about the Filipino veterans' plea for 'plain and simple justice, not mercenary reward for services rendered'.⁴⁰ Although the Legion did not take immediate action, it endorsed full veterans' benefits in 1950, and it granted equal membership to USAFFE veterans in 1955 once some technicalities were worked out regarding the citizenship of members.⁴¹

³⁴ The Secretary of State to the Ambassador of the Philippines, 13 March 1950, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1950, Volume VI: East Asia and the Pacific (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1976), 1420.

³⁵ '21 Philippine Aides Involved in GI Thefts,' *New York Times*, 23 October 1949, 33. The VA was already under fire for corruption in domestic veterans' programmes: Kathleen J. Frydl, *The GI Bill* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 186–221.

³⁶ Tillman Durdin, 'Manila Distressed by Economic Woes,' *New York Times*, 4 June 1950, 24; Ford Wilkins, 'Philippines' Economy is Near a Breakdown,' *New York Times*, 20 August 1950, 120.

³⁷ Donald A. Ritchie, *The Columnist: Leaks, Lies, and Libel in Drew Pearson's Washington* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 2; Drew Pearson, 'VA Subsidizes Harems for Filipino Veterans,' *Austin American-Statesman*, 14 October 1951, A34.

³⁸ Ibid. The wives of American veterans faced similar rumours of promiscuity in US popular culture: James I. Deutsch, 'Piercing the Penelope Syndrome: The Depiction of World War II Veterans' Wives in 1940s Hollywood Films,' *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 16 (1990), 31–42.

³⁹ Pearson, A34.

⁴⁰ Carlos Romulo, 'Summary of the Proceedings: Twenty-Eight Annual National Convention of the American Legion,' 2 October 1946, 53–5, American Legion National Library and Museum (ALNLM). The Veterans of Foreign Wars also supported expanded benefits: John N. Popham, 'Veterans Benefit Nation, Says Gray,' *New York Times*, 24 August 1949, 3.

⁴¹ US Congress, House of Representatives, 81st Cong., 2nd sess., *Hearing Before a Subcommittee on Veterans' Affairs*, 2 May 1950; American Legion, 'Resolution No. 29: Admission of Former Filipino Members of the USAFFE to Membership in the American Legion,' 19 November 1955, ALNLM; American Legion, 'Report of the National Adjutant,' 30 August 1954, ALNLM.

Despite this endorsement, Washington continued to deny most benefits that had once been promised. When he took office in December 1953, Philippine President Ramon Magsaysay, who built his political reputation as a vigorous advocate for USAFFE veterans, continued to pressure American officials to provide the promised benefits.⁴² In 1954 a joint resolution from the Congress of the Philippines demanded 'Restoration to Filipino veterans of their rights under the GI Bill'.⁴³

These demands largely fell on deaf ears in Washington. Congress had crafted legislation that increasingly treated the Philippines as a foreign nation in need of aid, as opposed to a former US colony that had been under American rule for half of the twentieth century. Indeed, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, responding to a reporter's question about Philippine foreign aid in 1956, made a point of noting that US expenditures should include not just direct economic aid, but spending on military and veterans' support.⁴⁴

The Vietnam War and veterans' benefits

The beginning of the Cold War reshaped diplomatic relations between Washington and Manila, and it also provided new opportunities to renegotiate the benefits owed to USAFFE veterans. The US national security establishment, which had long been concerned about the detrimental effects of the Rescission Acts on American-Philippine relations, soon emerged as an unlikely ally. One of Washington's most immediate concerns was the Hukbalahap rebellion in the Philippines, a peasant revolt that began in Central Luzon and grew so widespread by 1949 that American and Filipino officials feared it might develop into a communist insurgency.⁴⁵ Another key issue was continued access to military bases in the Philippines, a bulwark against communist forces in Asia for the US Navy and Air Force. The 1947 Military Bases Agreement, hammered out just a year after the Philippines gained independence, gave the US military a ninety-nine-year lease on Clark Air Base and the US Naval Base at Subic Bay.⁴⁶

When Ferdinand Marcos became president of the Philippines in 1965, the United States redoubled its efforts to secure the allegiance of its former colony. Marcos' anti-Communist politics made him a natural partner as the US looked for allies in Asia to support South Vietnam as part of President Lyndon Johnson's 'More Flags' initiative.⁴⁷ For President Johnson, Marcos' support would signal wider Asian

⁴² Nick Cullather, 'America's Boy? Ramon Magsaysay and the Illusion of Influence,' *Pacific Historical Review* 62 (1993), 310.

⁴³ Congress of the Philippines, Senate, Committee on Veterans and Military Pensions, *Presenting the Case of the Filipino Veteran to the People of the United States* (Manila, 1954).

⁴⁴ US Department of State, *American Foreign Policy: Current Documents* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1959), 857.

⁴⁵ Benedict J. Kerkvliet, *The Huk Rebellion: A Study of Peasant Revolt in the Philippines*, 2nd edition (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), xix.

⁴⁶ Bonifacio S. Salamanca, *Toward a Diplomatic History of the Philippines* (Diliman: University of the Philippines Press, 1995), 163.

⁴⁷ Lewis E. Gleeck, Jr., *The Third Philippine Republic, 1946–1972* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1993), 333.

backing for the war in Vietnam and could also allay fears in Congress that the nation was being stretched too thin.⁴⁸ Marcos, who had earlier opposed plans to aid the US, quickly changed his mind when he entered office. He soon agreed to send 2,000 combat engineers and security troops. This decision was due in no small part to relentless pressure from Washington, which included five diplomatic missions and a private meeting with Vice President Hubert Humphrey.⁴⁹

For his part, Marcos hoped to leverage US national security needs for increased military aid and private contracts to support the war efforts.⁵⁰ But the issue of USAFFE benefits continued to be a sticking point in American-Philippine relations. Marcos was keen to maintain strong ties with the veterans' community who formed a robust base of political support, and Johnson was well aware of the intense domestic pressure on the new Philippine president to deliver tangible benefits in exchange for support in Vietnam.⁵¹ 'Marcos is strongly pro-American', the President's National Security Advisor wrote ahead of Marcos' visit to Washington in 1966. 'But he is also fiercely pro-Philippines. He has backed our position in Vietnam at considerable political risk. [...] He has been under the gun from domestic critics.'⁵²

To provide additional support for Marcos, President Johnson launched a commission with American and Filipino legislators, diplomats, and senior officials to meet in Manila and Washington in 1966. One major point of contention was the fifty per cent level of compensation for Filipinos with service-connected injuries, an issue that became more acute as the Philippine peso lost value relative to the dollar. That had caused a dramatic drop in the value of veterans' disability pensions, creating a political problem for Marcos.⁵³ The Philippine delegation pressed hard to revisit the broader issue of GI Bill benefits, noting that the Rescission Acts were 'discriminatory, unconstitutional, and contrary to the elemental principles of fair play, equity and justice'.⁵⁴ Although the US delegation was willing to mitigate this inequity by adjusting the compensation levels to correct for the peso's reduced value, it refused to consider a broader package of benefits.⁵⁵

⁴⁸ Jonathan Colman and J.J. Widén, 'The Johnson Administration and the Recruitment of Allies in Vietnam, 1964–1968,' *History* 94 (2009), 489.

⁴⁹ Capozzola, 258.

⁵⁰ Man, 104.

⁵¹ Albert F. Celsoza, *Ferdinand Marcos and the Philippines: The Political Economy of Authoritarianism* (Westport: Praeger, 1997), 23.

⁵² Memorandum from the President's Special Assistant to President Johnson, 14 September 1966, *Foreign Relations of The United States, 1964–1968*, Volume XXVI: Indonesia; Malaysia-Singapore; Philippines (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2000), 732; Memorandum from the President's Special Assistant to President Johnson, 27 June 1966, *Foreign Relations of The United States, 1964–1968*, 733.

⁵³ Satoshi Nakano, 'The Filipino World War II Veterans Equity Movement and the Filipino American Community' (paper presented at the Seventh Annual International Philippine Studies Conference, Leiden, The Netherlands, 16–19 June 2004).

⁵⁴ Report of the Washington Conference, *Joint RP-US Commission for the Study of Philippine Veterans Problems*, Washington, DC, August 1966, 89.

⁵⁵ Report of the Washington Conference, 95.

In the end, Marcos got much of what he wanted. Addressing a joint session of the US Congress, Marcos declared that 'Asia cringed in anxiety' until the United States began military operations in Vietnam.⁵⁶ Days later, the White House announced sixty-five million dollars in new aid for agricultural and construction projects in the Philippines.⁵⁷ More important for veterans was the agreement to pay pensions for wounded veterans in dollars instead of pesos.⁵⁸ But according to American officials, this was foreign aid, not a renegotiation of the lost GI Bill benefits, and most of these payments were made to the Philippine government, not to veterans.⁵⁹

The modest gains that Filipino veterans experienced from the 1950s to the 1960s – the continuation of medical benefits for wounded soldiers and the payment of pensions in dollars instead of pesos – were due primarily to the exigencies of Cold War power politics. The need to demonstrate that there was international support for the war in Vietnam took precedence over whatever moral obligation the United States had to its former colony. Presenting these benefits as foreign aid, rather than benefit payments to former American soldiers, allowed Washington to maintain Manila's allegiance without drawing attention to its imperial past.

Domestic pressure and a partial resolution

The end of the Vietnam War and the economic stagflation of the 1970s led to new questions in Congress about the relative generosity of benefits received by wounded Filipino veterans. In 1973, an auditor's report criticised the level of foreign aid in the Philippines and noted that US investment amounted to \$US388 million when military aid, veterans' pensions, and health care were added to the more modest \$US68 million in direct economic aid.⁶⁰ Several years later, Senator William Proxmire of Wisconsin charged that the 'Philippine veteran literally gets 10 times as much in relation to the other citizens of his country as the American veteran gets. What he gets, he gets from the American citizen'.⁶¹ As the *New York Times* explained about the hearing, 'Congress was told today that thousands of Filipinos who served in or with United States armed forces lived a life of luxury in the Philippines on Veterans Administration benefits'.⁶² The *Detroit Free Press* went one step further, reporting that 'collecting US veterans benefits' is 'one of the most lucrative' ways to earn an income in the Philippines.⁶³

⁵⁶ 'Marcos Makes Profitable Visit,' *New York Times*, 18 September 1966.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Contracts and Grants to Provide for the Care and Treatment of United States Veterans by the Veterans Memorial Medical Center, US Code 38 § 1732 and § 107.*

⁵⁹ 'Settlement of Veterans Claims,' *United States Treaties and Other International Agreements* 18 (1967), 1392–3.

⁶⁰ US General Accounting Office, 'Better Use Could be Made of U.S. Assistance and Other Support to the Philippines,' 2 March 1973 (B-133359).

⁶¹ US Congress, Senate, Committee on Appropriations, 95th Cong., 1st sess., *Veterans Administration Benefits Program in the Republic of the Philippines*, 31 August 1977.

⁶² 'Benefits to Filipinos by V.A. Termed High,' *New York Times*, 1 September 1977, 15.

⁶³ 'Filipinos Get Rich Collecting Benefits as US Veterans,' *Detroit Free Press*, 6 February 1978, 12-D.

These investigations did not lead to any concrete changes in policy, but they invited greater scrutiny of an existing medical programme to care for Filipino veterans with service-connected injuries.⁶⁴ Although these benefits were not terminated, Congress amended a new veterans' health care bill 'to make it explicitly clear that it is the position of the United States that the primary responsibility for providing medical care and treatment for Commonwealth Army veterans and New Philippines Scouts rests with the Republic of the Philippines'.⁶⁵ Even as these debates were taking place, Filipino veterans whose service-connected injuries qualified them for medical and pensions benefits were often unable to receive them. In some cases, veterans missed out on decades of payments because they were unaware of the programmes. In other cases, they were confronted with impossible demands from the VA to provide paperwork that would prove they had served in approved guerrilla units during the war.⁶⁶

By the 1990s, however, the political situation in Washington was slowly becoming more favourable to Filipino veterans. A bipartisan coalition led by Hawai'i Senator Daniel Inouye, a decorated Second World War veteran, emerged as a key figure.⁶⁷ The number of Filipinos in the United States – particularly in Hawai'i and California – had increased dramatically since US immigration restrictions were liberalised in 1965, making them a potent political force.⁶⁸

Inouye inserted a special provision into the 1990 Immigration Act that provided a brief, two-year window for USAFFE veterans to seek naturalisation conditional on their resettlement in the United States. The bill received enthusiastic backing from the Philippine Embassy, which coordinated a campaign among prominent Filipino-Americans to support this proposal.⁶⁹ The bill's success can be partially explained by the expectation that few Filipino veterans, many of whom were in their seventies, would leave their homes to do so.⁷⁰ In addition, it was made clear that these veterans, although eligible for naturalisation, would not be provided with past veterans' benefits.⁷¹ In 1993, Inouye launched a further effort to restore benefits to some Filipino veterans, although he knew that congressional approval of retroactive payments was extremely unlikely.⁷²

Despite predictions to the contrary, by 1998 nearly forty per cent of the 70,000 eligible veterans of the Commonwealth Army had become naturalised American

⁶⁴ US Congress, Senate, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, *Hearings on the Veterans' Program Extension and Improvement Act of 1981*, 97th Cong., 1st sess., 30 April 1981, 529.

⁶⁵ Public Law 97-72 amended section 632 [now 1732] of Title 38.

⁶⁶ Hundreds of examples of the array of problems and bureaucratic hurdles can be found in the Philippine Veterans Case Files collection of the D.K. Inouye Papers, Hamilton Library, University of Hawai'i (DKIP).

⁶⁷ D.K. Inouye, 'Speech at Memorial Ceremony Commemorating American and Filipino Veterans,' 11 April 1981, DKIP, Box SP4.

⁶⁸ F. Landa Jocano, 'Filipinos in Hawaii: Problems in the Promised Land,' *Philippine Sociological Review*, 18 (1970), 152.

⁶⁹ N.T. Jimenez, Veterans Affairs Office, Embassy of the Philippines, 10 August 1990, DKIP, Box SB698.

⁷⁰ Nakano, 33–53.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² US Congress, Senate, *Filipino Veterans Equity Act of 1993*, S 120, 103rd Cong., 1st sess., introduced in Senate 21 January 1993; M. Blanco to D.K. Inouye, 13 August 1993, DKIP, Box SB698.

citizens. Many moved to the United States to provide a way for their own children to immigrate.⁷³ This, in turn, increased pressure on influential members of Congress from California and Hawai'i, the states where most veterans chose to settle, to champion relief bills.

Activist groups led by a younger generation of Filipino-Americans revived the memory of USAFFE veterans, too. Coupled with the lobbying campaigns were community-based protests under the umbrella of the Filipino Veterans Equity Movement. The most dramatic display came on 12 July 1997 when elderly veterans marched outside the White House chanting 'WE WANT JUSTICE!' 'EQUITY NOW!' Some were later arrested with a California Congressman after chaining themselves to the White House fence.⁷⁴ Unlike in decades past, this protest generated sympathetic editorials, likely due to the increased political power of Filipinos in the United States and the activism of second-generation Filipino-Americans.⁷⁵ *The Washington Post* called it 'demeaning to Americans as well as to Filipinos for the United States to continue denying benefits that were pledged at the highest level, then abundantly earned on the battlefield, then denied, then withheld through decades of Filipino entreaty'.⁷⁶ Or, as the *Los Angeles Times* simply concluded, 'The nation broke its promises. It is time to make amends'.⁷⁷

Congress began a full review of these benefits in 1998. Yet not all members were interested in revisiting the Rescission Acts. Bob Stump, Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, took to the pages of *The Washington Post* to express his opposition to the bill. 'While Filipino forces certainly aided the US war effort', Stump wrote, 'in the end they fought for their own, soon-to-be independent Philippine nation'.⁷⁸ Others, however, were more sympathetic. As Hawai'i Representative Patsy Mink noted, 'All they want is equal status, whatever all the other veterans are entitled because of their service in World War II'.⁷⁹

The VA, which had long been unhelpful, opposed the extension of benefits. In a report to the White House, it claimed that the cost would be prohibitive and that granting these benefits 'would run counter to Congressional intent from 1946 to present'. The VA also included a veiled threat, warning that if 'new fenced funding is not provided to the VA, US veterans will oppose this option'.⁸⁰ The VA, in other words, was demanding special, dedicated funding to support any extension of benefits. This claim is hard to understand given that the American Legion and the

⁷³ Antonio Raimundo, 'The Filipino Veterans Equity Movement: A Case Study in Reparations Theory,' *California Law Review* 98 (2), 2010, 602.]

⁷⁴ Nakano, 33–53.

⁷⁵ Yen Le Espiritu, *Home Bound: Filipino American Lives across Cultures, Communities, and Countries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 116–26.

⁷⁶ Editorial, 'Under the American Flag,' *Washington Post*, 13 December 1997.

⁷⁷ Editorial, 'Honor Promises, However Late,' *Los Angeles Times*, 19 June 1997, B8; James W. Blair, 'The Vicissitudes of the Victor,' *LA Weekly*, 10 September 1998.

⁷⁸ Bob Stump, 'Filipino Vets and Fairness,' *Washington Post*, 28 January 1998, A17.

⁷⁹ US Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, 105th Cong., 2nd. sess., *Benefits for Filipino Veterans*, 22 January 1998, 8.

⁸⁰ US Department of Veterans Affairs, *VA Benefits for Philippine Veterans*, 3 December 1997, W.J. Clinton Presidential Library (WJCPL), WJC-DPC: Records of the Domestic Policy Council, ca. 1992–1/20/2001, Series: Irene Bueno's Files, 1999 – 2001.

Veterans of Foreign Wars, the two largest US veterans' organisations, both testified in support of the legislation, in part because Filipino members pressured the national Legion to support the bill.⁸¹

The veterans did get some support from the Clinton Administration, which was anxious to court voters in the growing Filipino-American community.⁸² As one senior adviser wrote, 'The US drafted these Filipinos with a commitment to treat these veterans as US veterans, these Fil Vets served heroically during the Second World War and then Congress rescinded that commitment'.⁸³ But what was ultimately granted by Washington was disappointing. Congress refused to revisit the Rescission Acts and opted instead to approve a series of bills that provided minor increases to the pensions of old and disabled veterans living in the Philippines. It also allowed naturalised veterans the option to return to the Philippines where they could collect a portion of their Social Security benefits.⁸⁴ This small concession came in response to reports that old and impoverished Filipino veterans were living in squalid conditions in American cities where they had no family to care for them.⁸⁵

In 2008 the Democratic Party inserted a promise into its national political platform to continue to provide benefits and an easier path to naturalisation for Filipino veterans.⁸⁶ Yet by this point, many veterans, now old and in poor health, had lost faith. Filipino-American journalist Rene Ciria-Cruz put the matter plainly in a retrospective on the fight: 'Our old soldiers' demand for the restoration of their status as US veterans is not a plea for "welfare assistance" or charity or the restoration of an old friendship. It is a demand for legitimate compensation for wartime services rendered. There is no mincing words about it: Deadbeats must pay.'⁸⁷

After waiting for more than sixty years, Filipino veterans finally received official recognition and limited compensation for their war service in 2009. During the debate over the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, language was inserted to provide a one-time payment of \$US15,000 to Filipino veterans who were citizens and \$US9000 to noncitizens.⁸⁸ Although this compensation was celebrated by

⁸¹ US Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, 105th Cong., 2nd. sess., *Benefits for Filipino Veterans*, 22 July 1998; Department of the Philippines, American Legion, 'Resolution No. 98: Urge Congress to Amend Title 38 USC. Sec. 107—To Recognize the Status of Filipino Veterans,' 19 April 1996, ALNLM.

⁸² 'Briefing for the President of the United States and the U.S. Delegation to the Philippines,' 13 November 1994, DKIP, Box SB699.

⁸³ I.B. Bueno to J. Lambrew, 17 March 2000, WJCPL, WJC-DPC: Records of the Domestic Policy Council, ca. 1992-1/20/2001, Series: Irene Bueno's Files, 1999 - 2001.

⁸⁴ Raimundo, 613.

⁸⁵ Emelyn Cruz Lat, 'Aging Filipinos who Fought for U.S. Live Lonely Lives Waiting for Promises to be Kept,' *San Francisco Examiner*, 25 May 1997, C-1

⁸⁶ Democratic Party Platforms, 2008 Democratic Party Platform Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project <<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/2008-democratic-party-platform>> [accessed 12 December 2021].

⁸⁷ Rick Rocamora, *Filipino World War II Soldiers: America's Second-Class Veterans* (San Francisco: Veterans Equity Center, 2008), 80.

⁸⁸ Sara Farnoli et al., 'Trend Toward Equality? A Comparative Analysis of the Treatment of Noncitizens Veterans in the Administration of Post-Service Benefits,' *Veterans Law Review*, 2 (2010), 12.

some in Congress as a victory, it was modest recompense for their treatment.⁸⁹ For many Filipinos, it was too little, too late. As one veteran remarked, 'There is no anger. There is only pain. We are wounded in our hearts'.⁹⁰

Conclusion

Few pieces of legislation are as celebrated as the 1944 GI Bill. The education and financial support it provided to US veterans of the Second World War contributed to post-war American prosperity and political stability.⁹¹ But not all veterans were treated equally. As this article has shown, veterans of the USAFFE were forced to renegotiate their social contract with a metropolitan state that had no interest in remembering their sacrifices.

Military service has often provided a way for immigrants and other marginalised people to gain rights and recognition by the United States.⁹² Yet Filipino veterans, who were citizens of the largest US colony and served in the American armed forces, were denied access to GI Bill benefits that were promised during the war. Even after decades of protest, the benefits for Filipino veterans remained part of the convoluted eligibility system developed in 1946.

To be sure, the United States was not the only imperial nation that refused to provide equal veterans' benefits to colonial subjects who served in the Second World War. It was not until 2018 that the United Kingdom announced a modest program to provide aide for impoverished Indian soldiers who fought for Britain during the war.⁹³ The approximately 120,000 colonial soldiers who served with the French military were given smaller pensions than those provided to veterans in France.⁹⁴ Like other imperial powers, the United States has distanced itself from colonial veterans who fought with distinction under imperial command.

Memory can be mobilised, but as the experience of Filipino veterans has shown, it cannot match the metropolitan state's ability to forget. The deliberate repression of this memory of empire allowed Congress to treat Filipino veterans as supplicants forced to petition for what they were once promised. If, in the words of Ann Laura Stoler, the United States is 'haunted by empire', it is not for any lack of official effort to exorcise its imperial ghosts.⁹⁵

⁸⁹ Michael Honda, 'Justice for Filipino Veterans, at Long Last,' *Asian American Law Journal* 16 (2009), 193–6.

⁹⁰ Quoted in Jimiliz Maramba Valiente-Neighbours, 'Racialized Bodies and Phantom Limb Citizenship: The Case of the Filipino World War II Veterans' (PhD diss, University of California, Santa Cruz, 2016), 4.

⁹¹ Mettler, 10.

⁹² Cara Wong and Grace Cho, 'Jus Meritum: Citizenship for Service,' in *Transforming Politics, Transforming America: The Political and Civic Incorporation of Immigrants in the United States*, Taeku Lee et al., eds, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 71–88.

⁹³ 'UK Plans New Fund for Indian Soldiers Who Fought in World Wars,' *Times of India*, 1 November 2018; 'Gurkha veterans to receive equal pensions from British Army,' *New York Times*, 8 March 2007.

⁹⁴ Matthew Saltmarsh, 'Colonial Soldiers Want More from France,' *New York Times*, 12 August 2009; Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 211.

⁹⁵ Ann Laura Stoler, ed., *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

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