Aguinaldo and the First Philippine Republic

1898

Philippine independence declared

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During the Spanish-American War, Filipino rebels led by Emilio Aguinaldo proclaim the independence of the Philippines after 300 years of Spanish rule. By mid-August, Filipino rebels and U.S. troops had ousted the Spanish, but Aguinaldo’s hopes for independence were dashed when the United States formally annexed the Philippines as part of its peace treaty with Spain.

The Philippines, a large island archipelago situated off Southeast Asia, was colonized by the Spanish in the latter part of the 16th century. Opposition to Spanish rule began among Filipino priests, who resented Spanish domination of the Roman Catholic churches in the islands. In the late 19th century, Filipino intellectuals and the middle class began calling for independence. In 1892, the Katipunan, a secret revolutionary society, was formed in Manila, the Philippine capital on the island of Luzon. Membership grew dramatically, and in August 1896 the Spanish uncovered the Katipunan’s plans for rebellion, forcing premature action from the rebels. Revolts broke out across Luzon, and in March 1897, 28-year-old Emilio Aguinaldo became leader of the rebellion.

By late 1897, the revolutionaries had been driven into the hills southeast of Manila, and Aguinaldo negotiated an agreement with the Spanish. In exchange for financial compensation and a promise of reform in the Philippines, Aguinaldo and his generals would accept exile in Hong Kong. The rebel leaders departed, and the Philippine Revolution temporarily was at an end.

In April 1898, the Spanish-American War broke out over Spain’s brutal suppression of a rebellion in Cuba. The first in a series of decisive U.S. victories occurred on May 1, 1898, when the U.S. Asiatic Squadron under Commodore George Dewey annihilated the Spanish Pacific fleet at the Battle of Manila Bay in the Philippines. From his exile, Aguinaldo made arrangements with U.S. authorities to return to the Philippines and assist the United States in the war against Spain. He landed on May 19, rallied his revolutionaries, and began liberating towns south of Manila. On June 12, he proclaimed Philippine independence and established a provincial government, of which he subsequently became head.

His rebels, meanwhile, had encircled the Spanish in Manila and, with the support of Dewey’s squadron in Manila Bay, would surely have conquered the Spanish. Dewey, however, was waiting for U.S. ground troops, which began landing in July and took over the Filipino positions surrounding Manila. On August 8, the Spanish commander informed the United States that he would surrender the city under two conditions: The United States was to make the advance into the capital look like a battle, and under no conditions were the Filipino rebels to be allowed into the city. On August 13, the mock Battle of Manila was staged, and the Americans kept their promise to keep the Filipinos out after the city passed into their hands.

While the Americans occupied Manila and planned peace negotiations with Spain, Aguinaldo convened a revolutionary assembly, the Malolos, in September. They drew up a democratic constitution, the first ever in Asia, and a government was formed with Aguinaldo as president in January 1899. On February 4, what became known as the Philippine Insurrection began when Filipino rebels and U.S. troops skirmished inside American lines in Manila. Two days later, the U.S. Senate voted by one vote to ratify the Treaty of Paris with Spain. The Philippines were now a U.S. territory, acquired in exchange for $20 million in compensation to the Spanish.

In response, Aguinaldo formally launched a new revolt–this time against the United States. The rebels, consistently defeated in the open field, turned to guerrilla warfare, and the U.S. Congress authorized the deployment of 60,000 troops to subdue them. By the end of 1899, there were 65,000 U.S. troops in the Philippines, but the war dragged on. Many anti-imperialists in the United States, such as Democratic presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan, opposed U.S. annexation of the Philippines, but in November 1900 Republican incumbent William McKinley was reelected, and the war continued.

On March 23, 1901, in a daring operation, U.S. General Frederick Funston and a group of officers, pretending to be prisoners, surprised Aguinaldo in his stronghold in the Luzon village of Palanan and captured the rebel leader. Aguinaldo took an oath of allegiance to the United States and called for an end to the rebellion, but many of his followers fought on. During the next year, U.S. forces gradually pacified the Philippines. In an infamous episode, U.S. forces on the island of Samar retaliated against the massacre of a U.S. garrison by killing all men on the island above the age of 10. Many women and young children were also butchered. General Jacob Smith, who directed the atrocities, was court-martialed and forced to retire for turning Samar, in his words, into a “howling wilderness.”

In 1902, an American civil government took over administration of the Philippines, and the three-year Philippine insurrection was declared to be at an end. Scattered resistance, however, persisted for several years.

More than 4,000 Americans perished suppressing the Philippines–more than 10 times the number killed in the Spanish-American War. More than 20,000 Filipino insurgents were killed, and an unknown number of civilians perished.

In 1935, the Commonwealth of the Philippines was established with U.S. approval, and Manuel Quezon was elected the country’s first president. On July 4, 1946, full independence was granted to the Republic of the Philippines by the United States.