An Impossible Dream

While taking a walk in Baguio one day, I came upon an unusual sight. It was a parade — a long one, stretching perhaps half a kilometer, although the ranks were thin and loosely strung out for they marched only two by two. It was the annual parade of the American Legion. At the head were the flagbearers: the flag of the Legion to the left and the Philippine flag to the right, and in the center, in the place of honor, the Stars and Stripes of the United States.

It was an unexpected sight. With such a name — the American Legion — and with the American flag displayed so prominently, one would have expected to see a substantial number of Americans. But, in fact, there were hardly any. I counted three in the entire parade. (It is of course possible that some of the marchers were Filipinos who had become American citizens.) With very few Americans in attendance, the parade consisted almost entirely of Filipinos, complexioned in every shade of brown, some very dark. One of the marchers told me that there were some 750 men, and a much larger number of women.

They were grouped according to units, marching behind standards that bore their Post number and the city or province from which they came. They came from all over the Philippines. Each unit or post was named after a leader whose name was prominently displayed on their standard. Most of the units were named after American generals: Pershing, Wainwright, Arthur MacArthur. One unit was named after a chaplain, a friend and colleague of mine at the Ateneo, Father Thomas Cannon, S.J. Two or three units however were named after Filipino officers in the American army. One unit was named after General Fidel Segundo. Another (from Pangasinan) after Colonel Juan S. Moran. A third was named after a guerrilla leader, Ramon Magsaysay. (There may have been others, but I could not read all the standards as some were furled by the wind.)

The men wore the uniform of the Legion: dark blue trousers, white shirt or jacket, and blue “overseas” cap. Some wore their medals. There were a number with three medals on their chest. One had seven medals, another eight, and one had nine medals arranged in three rows of three. Most of the men were spry, but some were old. One was so old that he had to lean on the shoulders of two younger men.

These were all veterans. Some had belonged to the “Philippine Scouts” which was the Filipino arm of the regular American army. Others had belonged to the regular Philippine army which was incorporated into the USAFFE shortly before the Japanese invasion. Many of these men had probably been in the Death March. Towards the end of the parade, there was a pantomime showing Filipino soldiers being flogged or kicked by men in Japanese uniform. At the head of the pantomime was a placard which said: “Remember the Bataan Death March.”

The women of course were the most colorful element in the parade. They also were grouped into units, and each unit wore a different uniform. Some wore the native *patajong*; others came in western dress. The various groups from the Mountain Province wore their distinctive and colorful native costumes. These women (I found later) were auxiliaries of the American Legion. I spoke to some of them after the parade. They were war widows whose husbands (or in some cases, war orphans whose fathers) had died during the war.

I do not remember seeing or hearing a brass band. But there were one or two drum corps, composed of boys. And there was one corps of gongs from Bontoc: they were war veterans dressed in the uniform of the Legion, but with the native Bontoc headgear and sash.

This was the parade that I saw; and for some reason it made me sad. These men and women belonged to an older generation, to a chapter of Philippine history that had already ended. They (or their husbands or fathers) had fought in Bataan or elsewhere. They had fought (and their comrades had died) for a cause in which obviously they still believe. Yet much of what they fought and died for has already been thrown away by those who came after them. How many of those who now talk of freedom have fought or suffered for freedom as the men did in Bataan? And how many of those who have become wealthy or powerful through crime or corruption, ever remember those who suffered in the Death March or in Fort Santiago? Could it be that
Bataan and the incredible ordeals of the Japanese Occupation were all a waste?

Or perhaps what saddened me was the thought that these men and women of the American Legion still cherished a forlorn hope, an impossible dream. They are Filipinos; yet they call themselves the American Legion and march behind the Philippine flag which definitely takes second place to the Stars and Stripes. It is as if time had stood still for them; as if we were still living in the era before 1946, the era before Philippine Independence.

These men and women were undoubtedly loyal to the Philippines. Obviously, they were also loyal to America under whose flag they fought and whose name they bore. It is sad to think that their loyalty should be appreciated least of all by America. What were these dark-skinned men and women to the United States? What did America care for gong-beaters from Bontoc or for women in Kalinga apparel?

To the United States, they were simply veterans (or the widows or orphans of veterans) from World War II, entitled perhaps to a pension. But these men did not fight in “World War II.” These men fought for their homeland against a foreign invader. Those of us who lived through the war do not remember it as World War II; we remember it as “the war.” It was our war. It was our homeland that had been violated. It was our men and women who had been tortured and killed. The Filipinos who fought in Bataan or who walked in the Death March were not merely pawns in an international power-play: they fought and they marched to defeat in the forlorn hope that their country’s freedom might be protected and their nation’s honor vindicated.

I have every respect for the men and women of the American Legion. They have served their country and mine. But perhaps “their membership in the American Legion has made them somewhat of an anachronism. They should perhaps convene as veterans of the Philippines, who have fought — side by side with brave Americans — for the protection of their homeland.

These men and women have every reason to be proud of their medals, their uniforms, their wounds. But they should remember that they fought, not for America, but for the Philippines.

They can be proud of their past. But they should not live in it. The comradeship by which Americans and Filipinos fought for a common cause, under a common flag, was a beautiful thing which should be
cherished in memory. It is a proud chapter in our history. But — for reasons not of our making — “that comradeship has been broken and the common ideals rejected. We must pursue our own goals, live up to our own ideals, solve our own problems; if necessary, fight our own battles.

We are no longer under the American flag. We should cherish our friendship with America; try to renew it, if possible. But we must not depend on America, much less expect Americans to look after us. They have their own problems, their own preoccupations, their own goals.

We must respect the past, but we can not revive it. To try to do so would be an impossible dream.

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Outrage to Truth

In the long history of human atrocities, one of the worst was the so-called Rape of Nanking. Without bothering to declare war, the Japanese armies invaded China, captured several key cities, then in December 1937 entered the southern capital, Nanking. What followed is difficult to believe: during one entire month the Japanese soldiers were allowed to indulge in looting, burning, raping, killing.

How many Chinese civilians were massacred during that frightful month? Estimates vary. One estimate places the figure as high as three hundred thousand persons — nearly one-third of a million.

Time has a way of healing; and frightful as that event was, the Chinese had actually begun to forget the “Nanking incident” — when their wounds were suddenly opened anew by the Japanese themselves. They did so by issuing a textbook: a new official textbook of history for use in Japanese schools. From this official history it would seem that the Japanese never really did anything seriously wrong during their invasion and occupation of China, Korea, Taiwan and other countries in Asia. Events like the month-long Rape of Nanking are blandly glossed over as merely an “incident.” No wonder that there
are strong protests among the Chinese, the Koreans, the Taiwanese, over the publication of the new textbooks.

How does the official textbook deal with the Japanese occupation of the Philippines? Is there mention of the Death March? Of Fort Santiago? Of the atrocities of the Kempetai in Manila and the provinces? Is there mention of the massacre of Lipa? Of the murder of the Bishop of Mindoro? Of the killing of the Spanish and Irish priests in Manila? Of the torture and execution of the Jesuit, Father Agustin Consunji, and other Filipino priests? Of the seven hundred men, women and children suffocated in the ammunition room of Fort Santiago? Of the thousands massacred in the Manila streets and left unburied? Does the new textbook imply that such things never happened?

In Japan today there is (understandably) a strong emphasis given to the harm that other countries have done to Japan. In particular, the attention of the world is riveted upon the nuclear holocaust in Hiroshima. That was of course a frightful event which all of humanity must deplore. But if we condemn what was done to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, should we not equally — and with greater reason — condemn what the Japanese did to the other peoples of Asia? Why is nothing ever said about the starvation of prisoners of war; or about the brutalities committed against civilians in the Japanese attempt to establish their supremacy in Asia? One bomb kills thousands at once; their death is painless. But worse than death was the terrible human agony — long drawn-out — day after day in the Japanese torture chambers, inflicted in many cases upon innocent persons.

The Japanese are not the only ones who have tried to rewrite history. The Russians have tried to do so. So did Nazi Germany. So did the leaders of the French Revolution. And are there not in our own country some determined efforts to rewrite certain events in Philippine history, presenting the facts not as they happened but as the writers would like them to appear?

The French Revolutionists hated the past so much that they actually tried to abolish it: they began their new calendar with the Year One — as if nothing had happened in the world prior to the storming of the Bastille. That attempt to erase the past was born of the same desire that impelled a great Chinese emperor to collect all
the books and make a bonfire of them. As if to say, "The past is no more; what happened in the past is unimportant; only the present has any meaning." It is an act of incredible arrogance, of egomania. To claim that we — and we alone — have done all the good; that no one before us has done anything worthy of mention.

But if this nihilistic instinct to erase the past is damnable, the attempt to distort the past is worse. To alter the facts; to paint a completely false picture and present it as true; to portray a good thing as evil and an evil thing as good — is not this to deny the essential difference between good and evil?

What is it that impels people to distort the facts of history? The proximate motives vary; but beyond these proximate motives is an ultimate attitude: it is a lack of respect for truth itself. It is as if we were to say, "The truth does not matter; truth is what we want to make it." It is an echo of Pilate's contemptuous question: "What is truth?"

Recently, a "senior Israeli official" accused the Papacy of never having condemned the massacre of the Jews. He implied that the mass murder of millions of human beings by the Nazis was made possible by the Pope's connivance. A Vatican spokesman did not bother to deny it. He did not call the "senior Jewish official" a liar. He said something stronger: he said that the official's statement was an outrage to truth.

That is the case with all attempts to distort history: they are an outrage to truth.