

The Filipino World War II Veterans Equity Movement and the Filipino American Community

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Introduction

The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Act (hereafter INA) of 1990, which gave Filipino World War II veterans¹ the right to acquire U.S. citizenship, soon brought about a wave of elderly Filipino migrants into the United States, a number that had reached twenty-eight thousand by 1998. The U.S. media first reported their naturalization ceremonies as very patriotic, moving events, but soon found that most of those elderly newcomers live alone and are jobless poverty-stricken, and, in some cases, even homeless. It also became known that in spite of being naturalized U.S. veterans, Filipino veterans are not eligible for most of the benefits provided by the U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs (hereafter USDVA), including old age pensions and free medical care in veterans' hospitals, and thus have been given little choice but to live on scanty Supplementary Security Income (hereafter SSI) payments. Filipino American activists soon took up these issues as part of an urgent social crisis affecting the welfare of the majority of aged people within the US Filipino community and

¹ See page 3 on the term as defined by U.S. law. The term is referred to as distinct from veterans of the Filipino First and Second Infantry Regiments, which will be discussed later on.

also considered their solution as an ideal “empowerment” opportunity for Filipino Americans. Vigorous campaigns ensued, and the Filipino veteran issue came to receive considerable attention at the federal level, resulting in the so-called “SSI Extension Act” of 1999, which was the first major achievement of the Filipino veterans “equity movement” since the INA was first passed.

This paper will first provide a brief historical overview of “equity” issues related to Filipino World War II veterans, which have existed for more than half a century (see also Nakano 2002). Then the discussion will turn to the question of how the Filipino American community has reacted to these issues, focusing mainly on different and, at times conflicting, strategies among Filipino community activists, which became more and more evident as the plight of Filipino veterans gained more publicity. There seems to be a dilemma over the question of whether, or to what extent, the movement should “Americanize” the issue or keep it “Filipino” in character, as if it were a matter of choosing between two conflicting national identities. Further examination, however, will reveal that such diverse strategies merely represent different means to the same end: that is, surviving transnational or even “translocational” spaces created by an entanglement occurring between “the continuing past” and emerging new realities in postcolonial U.S.-Philippines relations.

Historical Background

To understand the issue in better perspective, it would be a good idea to know why Filipino veteran immigrants were able to become U.S. citizens under INA 1990 and why they were not permitted naturalization before that time. The legal issues in the United States should therefore be divided into two stages of development: the first spanning 1945-1990, when matters of equal treatment in U.S. veteran immigration privileges constituted the focus, the second beginning with the passage of INA 1990, during which equal treatment in veterans benefits (especially financial ones) became the focus. It was only in the latter phase that the issue became a Filipino-American community concern, despite the fact that the benefits issue itself has been a long-standing question in diplomatic relations between the U.S and Philippine governments since the end of World War II.

U.S Veterans Benefits and Filipino World War II Veterans

The USDVA numbered the war veteran population of the United States at 24.8 million as of 1 July 1999 and estimated the total population potentially eligible for veterans benefits, including bereaved families, at approximately 70 million. During fiscal year 2000, \$44.3 billion was allotted from the federal budget for veterans' affairs, and today the USDVA is the largest federal agency second only to the Department of Defense (USDVA 2000). The lion's share of federal spending for veterans and their families is used for education, death and disability compensation, old age pensions, burial costs, and medical care. Aged veterans living below the poverty line are eligible for a pension amounting to \$722 a month as of 1998, as well as free medical care at veterans hospitals throughout U.S and in many foreign countries. In contrast, SSI payments, which would be granted to impoverished Filipino veterans in 1999 amounted to only \$505 a month in 1998 (HCWM 1999).

In principle, the benefits system for veterans of U.S. wars is applicable regardless of nationality, provided that the veteran in question is a former member of some branch of the US armed forces. One important benefit for non-U.S. citizen veterans is a package of specific privileges enabling them to acquire permanent residency or even citizenship. Other benefits under USDVA discretion have been indiscriminately granted to foreign-born citizens of 66 countries around the world (HCVA 1998, 34); however, "Filipino veterans of World War II" were given a separate status regarding both citizenship and USDVA benefits.

The latter have been defined under U.S. law as former soldiers who were born in the Philippines and were residing in the Philippines when they were enlisted. To be considered veterans of World War II, they are all required to have served in active duty and been honorably discharged at any time between September 1, 1939 and December 31, 1946. They have been further broken down into the following four general categories: (1) veterans of the Philippine Scouts, which was established in 1901 by the U.S. colonial government as an auxiliary force; (2) veterans of the Philippine Commonwealth Army, which was established by the Philippine Commonwealth government to assume responsibility for national defense after independence scheduled for 1946 under the Philippine Independence Act of 1934 (48 Stat.463); (3) veterans of officially recognized anti-Japanese guerrilla units in the Philippines active during the Japanese Occupation; and (4) veterans of the New Philippine Scouts,

which was recruited by the U.S. Army after October 1945 under a special provision restricting the veteran status of its members. Standing outside these four categories are a small number of Filipinos who were directly inducted into the U.S. Armed Forces.

The vast majority of "Filipino World War II veterans" were members of the Philippine Commonwealth Army and anti-Japanese guerrilla units, neither of which had been directly formed or recruited by the U.S. military. The Philippine Independence Act, however, required all citizens of the Philippines to pledge allegiance to the United States until independence, and authorized the President of the United States to order the induction of Commonwealth Army troops into the U.S. Armed Forces at any time during the pre-independence period. It was in July 1941 that President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered the Commonwealth Army and U.S. Armed Forces stationed in the Philippines to be merged, thus forming the U.S. Army Forces in the Far East (hereafter USAFFE) under the command of General Douglas MacArthur. After the Japanese invasion of the Philippines in December 1941, Filipino and American troops literally shared the same fate at Bataan, Corregidor, the "Death March," and so forth. In May 1942, USAFFE surrendered to the Japanese Army, but a considerable number of American and Filipino officers and enlisted men refused to surrender and continued fighting underground. Through 1943 many of these anti-Japanese guerrillas renewed or newly established liaisons with the U.S. Army Command of the Southwest Pacific Area and placed themselves under the command of Douglas MacArthur.

Both the U.S. and Philippine governments praised these anti-Japanese guerrilla forces as strategically indispensable to the Allied war effort in the Pacific. On 28 October 1944, Commonwealth President Sergio Osmeña issued Executive Order No. 21 inducting "recognized guerrilla units" into the Commonwealth Army. This Order was generally understood as inducting qualified guerrillas into the U.S. Army, since the Commonwealth Army was then a part of the U.S. Army, thus making them eligible to receive military salaries and full veterans benefits. When the war was over, the Philippine Government was left with the difficult and hectic task of establishing a fair distinction between "authorized" and "unauthorized" guerrilla groups, which continued to be a very serious political issue until the end of 1948. Although there are no official statistics, the figure 200,000 has been often cited as a rough estimate of the total World War II Filipino veteran population that survived the War (HCVA 1998,

26). Of that number, 12,000 belonged to the “old” Philippine Scouts, and 120,000 were “original” members of the Commonwealth Army. The remainder, or around 70,000, were members of authorized guerrilla groups and the New Philippine Scouts.

Deprivation of Immigration Privileges

In 1942 Congress enacted the Second War Powers Act (56 Stat. 182), a section of which amended the Nationality Act of 1940 (54 Stat. 1137) to provide for the naturalization of non-citizens serving in the U.S. Armed Forces “during the present war.” The law exempted some of the usual naturalization requirements, such as a specified period of residence or literacy and educational testing in English. The law also enabled those servicemen to be naturalized without appearing before a naturalization court in the United States and directed the Commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (hereafter INS) to send authorized officers to overseas military posts to do everything necessary to naturalize non-citizen servicemen on the spot. The deadline for applying for such privileges was later set at 31 December 1946 (Ch. 199, 56 Stat. 182).

According to official accounts, the law was at first interpreted by the U.S. Government as applicable to all the Filipino veterans, while the Philippine Government allegedly expressed its concern to the Department of State regarding the risk of mass emigration, for they left no memoranda or other official records regarding the exchange of opinions between the two governments on this matter. The U.S. government itself most probably may have wanted to avoid the mass immigration of Filipinos, which was then blocked by the Tydings-McDuffie law, but would nevertheless be overridden by the 1940 nationality act regarding war veterans. The U.S. thus discouraged Filipino veterans naturalization in every possible way imaginable, like refusing to accept applications, not sending officers in charge to confer citizenship, not publicizing information about the nationality act. It was decided that only applications from former members of the Philippine Scouts would be accepted, since they were considered to have been an integral part of the U.S. Armed Forces even before the war. As many as 4,000 Filipino veterans, or one-third of those eligible, applied and were granted U.S. citizenship by the end of 1946, indicating that mass emigration could have occurred if other applications had not been refused.²

² Ugo Carusi, Commissioner, INS, to Tom C. Clark, Attorney General, September 13,

It was during the mid-1960s that Filipino war veterans began their legal struggles to recapture the immigration privileges once denied them. It was, however, only after quarter century of court cases giving one different decision after another, that the Supreme Court put an end to years of Filipino veteran naturalization suits with *INS v. Pangilinan* [486 U.S. 875 (1988)]. The decision held that a court by no means has “the power to confer citizenship in violation of the limitations imposed by Congress” and that “the historical record does not support the contention that the actions at issue here were motivated by any racial animus.” While the Court did slam the door on Filipino veterans by siding entirely with the government, it was also tacitly sending a message to the U.S. Congress that “the congressional command here could not be more manifest,” since Filipino veterans’ rights were being explicitly deprived by a series of Congressional acts (Murphy 1988).

Congress responded quickly to the Supreme Court's decision, partly because it left the plaintiffs vulnerable to deportation (Blanco 2001). With no congressmen or senators of Filipino ancestry, such members as Senator Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii), Congressmen Tom Campbell (R-Cal.) and Benjamin Gilman (R-N.Y.) sponsored a bill to permit Filipino veterans special naturalization. House hearings were held in September 1989, at which the [Bush] administration made no argument against the bill (HCJ 1990), and the item was then incorporated into the INA 1990, which became law in November of that year.

One may wonder how the U.S. Congress was able to solve the issue so easily, but time seems to have been the more decisive factor than anything else. The majority of Filipino veterans had already reached their seventies by the year 1990, and their population was steadily diminishing. At the 1989 House hearings, Congressman Campbell emphasized, “It’s unlikely that many of these veterans will choose to move to America in the twilight of their lives. Rather, they will choose to remain in their homeland with family and friends” (HCJ 1990, 44). In other words, aging and dwindling numbers made it possible for Congress to settle the issue as “a matter of justice and honor.” It is also very important that the sponsors of the bill tried to separate the naturalization issue from veterans benefits equity issues. Campbell stated at the same hearing that giving these veterans citizenship will not “make them eligible for federal benefits which

1945; Edward J. Shaughnessy, Special Assistant to the Commissioner of the INS, to Ugo Carusi, October 19, 1945. Quoted in 629 F.2d 204 (1980).

they do not receive” (HCJ 1990, 43). The INA 1990 also stipulated that the law “shall not be construed as affecting the rights, privileges, or benefits of” Filipino veterans coming to the United States (Section 405, PL 101-649).

The “promise kept” after almost a half-century, however, would soon be articulated with the realities of Philippine society and cause an influx of elderly and “adventurous” veteran immigrants far beyond expectation. The fever generated by the bill was remarkable indeed. By 1998, over twenty-eight thousand out of the surviving seventy thousand Filipino veterans eligible for immigration privileges had been naturalized, and some seventeen thousand veterans actually came to live in the United States (HCVA 1998, 192).

Veterans Benefits Issues and Postwar Philippine-U.S. Relations

Once veteran immigrants began pouring into the United States, the focus the struggle quickly turned to discrimination and inequality with respect to the USDVA veterans benefits, due the misery being suffered by Filipino veterans (to be discussed in Chapter 3).

Like the immigration privilege issue, discriminative status regarding financial benefits for Filipino veterans in the United States also dates back to the end of World War II. In September 1945, the then Federal Bureau of Veterans Affairs officially stated that Filipino veterans were eligible for U.S. veterans benefits (USHC 1947, 65). However, in February 1946, Congress passed a section of the Supplementary Appropriation Rescission Act of 1946 that stated services in the Philippine Commonwealth Army or authorized guerrilla units “were not to be considered as active military service for the purposes of veterans benefits.” However, members of the Philippine Commonwealth Army had paid out a certain amount from their salaries for the purpose of veteran insurance, which would be paid in the form of service-connected survivor’s pensions and disability pensions in case of death or disablement. Regarding these pensions, Congress enacted that these pensions should be paid, but only at half their value; that is, as if one dollar were equivalent to one Philippine peso, instead of two.

Although the Rescission Act has been amended several times, its basic provisions still stand (38 USC. 107). Since the Act distinguishes veterans not by nationality but by specific military career during the War (according to which military organization they belonged to), Filipino veterans would still not be eligible for full benefits, even if they changed their nationality and became U.S. citizens.

As mentioned above, the INS in the early postwar years accepted only such applicants as former members of the Philippine Scouts, who were eligible for full veterans benefits. This made the contradiction between the Rescission Act and immigration privileges invisible in the United States until the 1990s, while for decades veterans benefits equity had been exclusively the concern of Filipino veterans in the Philippines, who were demanding repeal of the Rescission Act. There was also fierce reaction expressed in the general Filipino community to the insulting language of the Act, stating that the guerilla struggle against the Japanese during the War was “not to be considered as active military service.” The U.S. government was also concerned that the issue may jeopardize postcolonial Philippines-U.S. relations. President Harry S. Truman stated on the occasion of signing the Act “they fought with gallantry and courage under the most difficult conditions” and “I consider it a moral obligation of the United States to look after the welfare of the Filipino Army veterans,” and promise that the matter would be deliberated by the two governments (USHC 1947, 65-69).

The bilateral government talks on the issue, however, were to drag on for many years. Immediately after the enactment of the Rescission Act, the two governments agreed that the U.S. side would consider providing medical care and funeral benefits. In 1948, Congress approved the construction of a veterans hospital in Manila (62 Stat. 1210). The Philippine government and Congress then decided to provide their own veterans benefits at reduced rates under the Philippines GI Act (78 Phil.Code §1-15). However, the Philippine government soon fell into chronic fiscal trouble and repeatedly asked the U.S. government for financial assistance. Frustrated by these requests, the U.S. government threatened to end assistance for veterans benefits in 1950 (FRUS 1950, Volume VI, 1419-22). The Philippine government, however, did not withdraw its demands all that easily, for in 1951 funeral benefits and burial flags were provided for (65 Stat. 32-33; Meyer 1965, 18-20, 43-44, 100-101). In 1962, further economic crisis and inflation made it impossible for the Philippines to maintain its exchange rate, as the peso was devaluated from 2 to 3.9 pesos to the U.S. dollar. This resulted in a sharp decrease in survivor and disability pensions, which were still being paid at the reduced rate of one peso to the U.S. dollar. Then the Philippine government asked that the calculation be changed from one-peso-to-the-dollar to fifty-cents-to-the-dollar. The U.S. government met President Marcos' demand in 1966, out of a desperate desire for “more flags” to

join and support the U.S. military involvement in Vietnam.

Throughout the years of these bilateral government talks and congressional actions, the consensus reached between the two governments about the unfairness of the Rescission Act gradually faded, and the U.S. government came to consider the issue as just one more item of the Philippine government's endless demands for assistance, putting it in the context of the paternalistic image of the United States as a permanent donor and the Philippines as a permanent goodwill-seeker. It also became technically as well as in principle very difficult to solve the issue simply by repealing the 1946 Rescission Act, since too many remedial measures had already been taken. On the Philippines side, however, veterans' organizations as well as the government have continued to seek remedies and/or repeal, sending a residential commissioner on veterans' affairs to the Philippine embassy in Washington, D.C., and making the veterans' benefits discussed between the two governments a regular issue (Urgello 2001).

During the 1990s, however, focus of the issue suddenly turned to the status of newly naturalized Filipino American veterans in the United States, to which veterans' organizations in the Philippines show mixed reactions. They welcomed the issue as gaining unprecedented publicity in the U.S. Congress, though they suspected and feared that the whole issue would end up saving only naturalized veterans, not them.* The following discussion will prove they were right.

The Filipino Community Encounters the Issue

According to the U.S. Bureau of Census, the Filipino³ population in the United States reached 1,850,314 in 2000, ranking as the second largest Asian population group in the United States next to Chinese descendents (2,432,585) (USBC 2001a, 1), and continues to increase rapidly. Among countries of origin

³ In this paper, the term "Filipino" is used as a generic name transcending nationality referring to those who regard the Philippines as their homeland or being of Filipino ancestry. When it is necessary to draw a further distinction, such terms as "naturalized Filipino Americans" for immigrants with U.S. citizenship, "non-naturalized Filipino immigrants" without such, and the "1.5 generation" for those who immigrated in their childhood will be used. The term "Filipino-American community" will be used as a generic name referring to Filipinos as composing an ethnic group in U.S. society, regardless of citizenship.

for “lawfully” admitted immigrants to the United States during 1998 to 2001, The Philippines ranks fourth, accounting for 160,000 entries, standing along with the two most populous countries in the world, India (180,000) and China (170,000), next to Mexico (660,000), a border country of 97 million people (USINS 2002, 6). Despite being such a sizable ethnic group in the United States, Filipino-Americans have long been said to lag far behind Japanese- and Chinese-Americans in terms of their presence in the U.S. public sphere, being often labeled as “an invisible minority.” Many Filipino community activists think that such “invisibility” is a problem that needs to be overcome, and thus show keen interest in political, economic and cultural “empowerment” (*Washington Post*, October 28, 1998, A6). It was under such circumstances Filipino-Americans encountered an issue virtually unknown to the American public, even in their own communities.

The “Captive Veterans” Affair: 1993

Despite media coverage featuring such patriotic moments as the oath-taking ceremony held at the San Francisco Marriott Hotel in September 1992, where some five hundred newly naturalized Filipinos, mostly in their 70s and 80s, proudly swore allegiance to the United States (*San Francisco Chronicle*, September 25, 1992, A23), daily life for Filipino veterans in the United States to be hard to the present, and their immigration fever has been fully exploited by crooks. For example, there are many Filipino veterans with neither enough legal knowledge or savings to come and stay in the United States, so on their arrival immigration agents are happy to offer to take care of them and even advance money for their voyage and accommodations. It's just good business, even if the veterans have no prospect for gainful employment after settling in the United States, since the agents can lend them money at high interest rates, mortgaged by their SSI checks, which are payable to the bearer on demand (*Los Angeles Times*, January 1, 1995, B1; *Sacramento Bee*, August 8, 1995, A10).

In December 1993, the ordeal of Filipino veterans gained the first media attention by a shocking story of “captive veterans” carried by the *San Francisco Examiner* (December 19, 1993, B1), which reported that seventeen Filipino World War II veterans had been placed in *de facto* captivity by one Castalino Dazo, who called himself a Filipino American immigration and naturalization consultant working out of Richmond, California. Dazo allegedly locked up the old men in three houses, including his own residence, in order to secure their

SSI checks and held them in virtual slavery as house servants by chaining and beating them, feeding them dog food, and otherwise abusing them as the occasion demanded. The news article was written by the *Examiner* staff writer Steven Chin, but it was actually Rick Rocamora, a naturalized Filipino American freelance photographer, who first investigated the affair, then approached his friend Steven Chin to carry the story.

According to Rocamora's account, he went to the San Francisco Marriott in September 1993 to cover the naturalization ceremony held there and found several veterans carrying flyers distributed by Dazo, whose name he had already known as a notorious immigration consultant. Then he traced the flyers and found the "captive veterans" in Richmond. Thanks to the article, during the following month Rocamora successfully organized a rescue mission joined by Filipino American volunteers, including Lourdes Tancinco, herself a naturalized Filipino-American and immigration lawyer, and Contra Costa County local authorities. With the help of Tancinco, the rescued veterans filed suit against Dazo and in February 1995 the ten of them were granted damages amounting to 237,000 U.S. dollars (Rocamora 2001; Tancinco 2001a).

Following this the *Los Angeles Times* and other major Pacific Coast newspapers began reporting the sufferings of elderly, poverty-stricken Filipino veterans throughout the region, while local Filipino-American community activists who had become aware of the problem began organizing community support to help these senior citizens, while launching "equity" campaigns for the recognition of Filipino World War II veterans as eligible for the full range of U.S. veterans' benefits.

San Francisco Veterans Equity Center

The most successful community support and equity movement at the local level has so far been organized by the San Francisco Veterans Equity Center (hereafter SFVEC), which was inaugurated in November 1999 with the financial help of San Francisco city government to provide "culturally and linguistically appropriate services" to meet the urgent needs of Filipino veterans. The Center offers such services as a free "legal clinic," "health education," "educational forum," the "Mano Po Lolo Program" (an inter-generational program for students and Filipino veterans to participate in recreational activities and field trips), and other programs to meet the everyday needs of the Filipino veterans living in San Francisco and other cities in the Bay Area (SFVEC 2001; Antonio 2001).

The SFVEC's board includes Lourdes Tancinco as its president and

Rick Rocamora as one of its directors, both of whom have become respected local Filipino figures since their involvement in the “captive veterans” affair. Tancinco immigrated to the United States in 19** and began practicing immigration law the same year that the “captive veterans” affair occurred. She runs an immigration law office with her husband near the Powell Street BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) Station, where many Filipino veterans around the Bay Area gather on their way to the nearby Social Security Administration office and Filipino grocery stores. On the walls of the Tancinco’s office hang several of Rick Rocamora’s highly acclaimed photographs from his *Second Class Veterans*, portraying the lives Filipino veteran immigrants and recording the rescue mission of 1993 (Tancinco 2001a).

Rick Rocamora came to the United States immediately after graduation from U.P., only a few months before Marcos declared martial law in 1972. Then “[a]fter 18 years of corporate work in sales and management, he quit his job in 1990 to pursue a new career in photography (Rocamora 2004).” He is now one of the most acknowledged documentary photographers in the Bay Area. As a firm social justice advocate, he has produced and been commissioned to produce such works as *It is about Time*, documenting Japanese American survivors of wartime internment camps, *Freedom and Fear: Bay Area Muslims After Sept. 11* and *Caged: Manila’s Invisible Children*, which documents street children who have been incarcerated in jails, youth “rehabilitation” centers, and mental hospitals in Manila (Rocamora 2001; *).

Naturalized Filipino Americans and the Issue

Rocamora and Tancinco are the kind of naturalized, highly educated Filipino Americans who have so far taken the lead in the movement for Filipino veterans' rights. At the time of my visit to SFVEC in January 2001, the office was being run by such naturalized Filipino Americans as Louisa Antonio, who immigrated with their parents at high-school age, and Mars Estrada, who came as a foreign student, then decided to stay in the United States (Antonio 2001; Estrada 2001) These people are indispensable, since veteran immigrants seek the help of well-intentioned, friendly people capable of communicating with them in their vernacular languages, on the one hand, while negotiating effectively with American society on their behalf regarding complicated matters dealing with the paperwork in order to receive SSI payments and health care or to sponsor their family for immigration if they are eligible.

The predominance of naturalized Filipino Americans, however, is a

significant feature found not only in the movement, but also among the whole Filipino population in the United States both in numbers as well as social and political influence. According to *Census 2000*, the two-thirds (122 million) of the Filipinos in the United States are “foreign-born (USBC 2001b, 12),” (which for all intents and purposes means “Philippines-born”) and are highly varied the in time and age of immigration and nationality. Among them, the “first wave” prewar immigrants are generally referred to as the “manong generation,” whose significance in the community's history will be discussed later. Then there are the not so numerous “second wave” immigrants of the early post World War II years, followed by the long line of “third wave” immigrants, amounting to thirty to forty thousand annually since the 1970s and thus occupying the vast majority of the “foreign-born” Filipino population. *Census 1990* shows a conspicuously high percentage of naturalized Filipino Americans having immigrated before 1980 among the age groups between ages 35 to 54 (See Figure 1). Though the number of “native-born (U.S. born)” Filipinos is naturally increasing among these age groups, we cannot foresee that they will to gain numerical predominance in the near future, due to the high rate of new immigrants from the Philippines, whose average age is the early thirties. (CFO 2004).

Census 1990 states that the median household annual income of the “foreign-born” Filipinos in 1989 was \$45,289 and their percentage “below poverty level” was 4.6 %, while the median income of the “native-born” Filipinos was 37,943 dollars and their poverty rate 8.3 %. The median income of the naturalized Filipino Americans who immigrated before 1980 was 49,571 dollars and their poverty rate only 3.1 %, figures nearly equal to Japanese Americans, one of the wealthiest ethnic minorities in the United States (USBC 1993, 150-151) As to the level of education, only 17.1 % of “native-born” Filipino Americans over 25 years old held bachelor’s degrees, while 34.3 % of the “foreign-born” population did. Among the 4,012 Filipino doctoral degree holders in the United States, 88 percent of them were “foreign-born” (USBC 1993, 80-81). Another survey conducted sent among Filipinos teaching at universities in the United States in 1998 shows that 92 of the 108 respondents were born in the Philippines (Yuson 1999, 112-114). Though it is of course necessary to take into account that the “native-born” Filipino population includes pre-adult population whose income and educational attainment would naturally be statistically lower than the older “foreign-born” members, these figures indicate a definite predominance of naturalized immigrant Filipinos over the native-born

in numbers, income and educational background, thus demanding that they take the lead in community affairs.

Veterans as the Second “Manongs”

Another interesting aspect found in the way the Filipino American community encountered the issue of war veteran immigrants is that the latter came to play sort of similar role to that of the first generation “manongs” in the community movement during the 1970s. The “manongs” were predominantly single male immigrant laborers who came to the United States during the 1920s to 1930s, struggling to survive during a time of heavy racial discrimination and the Great Depression. This generation has its best narrator in Carlos Bulosan (1911-56), the author of *America is in the Heart* (1946), a widely recognized classic in Asian American literature, which vividly portrays the miserable ordeal of a young Abe Lincoln-worshipping Filipino boy in the United States. Another “manong” was Philip Vera Cruz (1904-94), an exceptional labor leader who organized the United Farm Workers Union with Cesar Chavez, the legendary Mexican-American labor leader.

The reprint of *America is in the Heart* by the University of Washington Press in 1973 marked the rediscovery of “manongs” by an emerging Filipino American community movement groping for symbols that could be widely shared among its ranks. That was when it found the “manongs,” old men then mostly over seventy, still working as farm workers in California’s “factories in the field” right out of the pages written by Bulosan and Cary MacWilliams a quarter of a century before. The movement was kicked off by the urgent issue of social security and health care for “manongs” and the organization of community movements such as volunteer labor to construct the “Paolo Agbayani Retirement Village” for the aged Filipino members of the UFW in Delano, California. (Quinsaat 1976, 122-145).

The service and care for “manongs” was looked upon as a precious opportunity for young people to strengthen their Filipino-American or “Pinoy” consciousness by listening to “manongs” and learning their life long experiences as community history, and by learning that showing “respect for elders” was a traditional Filipino virtue. It was student volunteers on “Agbayani Village” project who met Philip Vera Cruz and worked with him on an oral history entitled *Philip Vera Cruz: A Personal History of Filipino Immigrants and the Farmworkers Movement*, the publication of which was delayed due in part to serious charges leveled against Cesar Chavez about his compromise with the Marcos

dictatorship. However, since its publication in 1992, the memoir has been regarded as very valuable narrative on “manong” experiences, like Bulosan’s (Scharlin & Villanueva 1992).

The majority of the Filipino veteran immigrants of the 1990s were in their high teens to early twenties at the time the Pacific War broke out, which would make them a decade or two younger than the “manongs” whose wave of immigration was blocked by the Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934. The veteran immigrants appeared before the Filipino American community during the 1990s, exactly when the “manongs” were departing. They bore a close resemblance to the “manongs” in terms of the misery revealed by the “captive veterans” affair, which gave the impression that they were going through the same ordeals experienced by Bulosan and Vera Cruz during the 1930s, but at the age of over seventy. Besides sharing an experience as poverty-stricken elders, the veteran immigrants and “manongs” were equally isolated from mainstream society, which makes their way of life more transnational or tied to their homeland, continuing to don Philippine cultural traits, speak in dialects, and long to return home. This qualifies them as a symbol of an ethnic community, imagined as a group of people having a common past and homeland. In this way the veteran immigrants draw enormously sympathetic reactions from the whole Filipino American community as “second manongs.”

Veterans as the Same Immigrants

One more source of compassion for the veterans is the fact of their being immigrants who lived postwar Philippine society, the similar experience of the dominant group within the Filipino-American community. The transnational way of life that the veterans represent is a phenomenon shared by recent immigrant Filipinos as well as by every emerging ethnic group with a large recent immigrant population, partly because of more tolerance towards diversity in post-civil rights U.S. society, but probably more because globalization of the world economy has made it much easier for them to sustain ties with their homeland, while their home governments are trying to keep potential emigrants within their respective national spheres by giving them such privileges as dual citizenship or absentee voting rights.

Filipino-Americans have generally been regarded as one of the most fully assimilated ethnic groups in the United States (Jiobu 1988, 1905) because of their 58 percent ratio of naturalization, which is far beyond the national average (35.1 %) and the highest among the major ethnic groups (USBC 1997);

the above-discussed socio-economic data indicates that even relatively recent immigrants are being successfully assimilated into the mainstream society. The high ratio of naturalization, however, should also be considered in the light of incentives for immigrants to place themselves in more advantageous positions to sponsor their families for immigration to the United States. In other words, their assimilation through naturalization is inseparably related to their transnational way of life, like the head and tail of a coin.

Naturalized Filipinos therefore *know* that the veterans came to the United States exactly for the same reasons as they themselves did. Although the veterans interviewed (most probably in English) about their naturalization ceremonies spoke in unison about their joy of realizing their dreams to become American citizens (*Los Angeles Times*, February 2, 1992, B1), it is hard for them to believe at face value that they are Americans at the age of over seventy. A few years later, one Filipino American journalist capable of conducting interviews in Tagalog successfully captured the voices of veteran immigrants enduring poverty and other difficulties of everyday life in the hope of sponsoring their families or reducing their living expenses to send a part of their SSI allotments home (*San Francisco Chronicle*, December 14, 1997, Z1). Though the means to entering the United States may have been very different between the poor veteran immigrants and the more successful naturalized Filipino Americans, they both had the same end, finding a way out of the miserable life that they and their families and relatives were living in the Philippines. It therefore may be said that the community movement for the veterans has an aspect of mutual aid between the rich and the poor among contemporaries or fellow countrymen who have found themselves in the same boat.

U.S. Congress and the Issue: 1997-2001

It is, however, their being not the Filipino but the American veterans that could gain sympathy from the public. In other words, only "Americanization" of the issue could make the movement a rare success in Filipino American's community movement, which has been criticized on its ineffectiveness and lack of unity. Ironically enough here rests the seeds of division within the community over strategies while the movement was about to gain grounds.

White House Demonstration: 1997

The way they successfully “Americanized” the issue was symbolically represented by a demonstration staged in front of the White House on July 12, 1997. Before loud applause and cheers, elderly Filipinos in veteran’s uniforms and caps marched in parade shouting such slogans as “WE ARE AMERICAN CITIZENS!” “WE WANT JUSTICE!” “EQUITY NOW!” Then a dozen of them chained themselves to the iron fences in front of the White House Garden, being joined by young Filipino American activists as well as Congressman Bob Filner (D-Cal.). All of them were soon gently arrested by the police. The sensational nature of the scene and the fact that a Congressman was arrested made the demonstration a must for major TV network news programs that evening (ACFV 1999a).

This well planned event was actually organized by the American Coalition for Filipino Veterans (hereafter ACFV), a non profit organization based in Washington, D.C., which has so far been very successful in gaining concrete results from the Congress and the administration. The president was Patric Ganio, a World War II veteran of Bataan and the Death March, while Eric Lachica, a naturalized Filipino American who immigrated at the age of high school years as well as a son of the World War II veteran, is practically running the organization as executive director. Being a characteristically pragmatic single-issue lobbyist, Lachica has taken “step-by-step” strategy aiming at improving conditions of the veterans’ lives by series of remedial measures acted by the Congress or administrative considerations in veteran’s favor, using his wide bi-partisan personal connections with Congress, administration, and media.

As shown in the above event, ACFV’s publicity strategy is to demonstrate that the claimants for benefit equity are more than anything else U.S. citizens and the question is a civil rights matter, in which the essential equality of citizens in U.S. society became the focus. In this regard Congressman Filner’s involvement is symbolic, since he is a known civil rights advocate who once joined the Freedom Rides movement of 1961 and was jailed in a southern state prison. He was elected from the 50th Congressional District of California, covering the southern end of the state including U.S. Pacific Fleet Base in National City. The district’s population is divided into Latinos, Blacks, Asians, and Whites, and Filipino-Americans account for as much as 15 percent, the largest percentage in any continental states’ congressional districts

and second only to Hawaii's. Filner found out about the issue during his door-to-door election campaign. Upon election, he chose to join the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, out of consideration for large veteran population residing in the San Diego area in hope of expanding support for him among more moderate or even conservative voters in the district. Thus it is no wonder the issue was an ideal item for Filner's agenda, since it is not only an important local issue but it could also be a national issue through which he can demonstrate his image as a civil rights advocate as well as a patriotic American working for the veterans who fought in the past "good war" (Schultze 1999).

U.S. Congressional Action

Filipino veterans equity issued was unprecedented in the amount of publicity it directed at Filipino-American community. In Congress, equity bills were repeatedly introduced and increasingly gained endorsement. The number of co-sponsors in the House reached 209 during the 105th Congress (H.R. 386, 1997-1998), and congressional hearings were held in 1997 before the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs and in 1998 before the House Committee on Veterans Affairs (SCVA 1997; HCVA 1998). During the 1998 election, the Democratic Party party platform officially supported some kind of equity bill. The number of Republican endorsers in Congress was also increasing, while all of the major national veterans organizations, such as the American Legion and Veterans of the Foreign Wars, had already endorsed the bill.

As of the year 2000, the final obstacle to passing an equity act is said to be opposition from House Veterans Committee Chairperson Bob Stump (R-Ariz.), since it is generally very difficult to send a bill to a plenary session of the Congress by overriding opposition of the concerned committee chairperson. As a senior member of Congress familiar with the history of the Filipino veterans benefits issue, Stump has argued the United States already gave considerable benefits to Filipino veterans, and "while Filipino forces fought bravely and certainly aided the U.S. in the war effort, in the end they fought for their own and soon to be independent Philippine nation." Such a statement questioning the essential motivation of the Filipino veterans poses a serious barrier to the passage of legislation. At the House hearings, Filner and other advocates of the equity Act countered Stump's argument by emphasizing that the Filipino veterans defended the Philippines as a U.S. territory, which means they defended the United States for the sake of the United States (HCVA 1998, 3, 37, 55).

This debate over motivation suggests that the equity movement has gained support from the Congress especially via the “Americanization” of the issue. However, the more the Filipino veterans issues becomes “Americanized,” the more likely that naturalized veterans residing in the United States will become the sole object of relief, although the Rescission Act still affects them, since it was indiscriminately applied to the Filipino veterans regardless of nationality.

Thus, it was only a matter of time that cracks would begin to appear within the coalition movement originally aiming at fairness for all the Filipino veterans. Since their initial introduction in Congress, the equity bills have tried to repeal sections in the Rescission Act that block equal benefits regardless of the nationality. However, it has become increasingly difficult for congressional advocates to maintain this position, despite increasing congressional interest, since that interest tends toward the matter of merely maintaining civil equality among U.S. citizens. Given the fact that nearly five veterans die everyday in the United States (*International Examiner*, June 17, 1998, 10), more of the naturalized veterans groups and their advocates in Congress are being forced to lean toward compromise whenever any substantial relief measures can be hammered out.

The SSI Extension Act: Schism in the Face of Success

Once it became certain that the Filipino Veterans Equity Bill would die in the 105th Congress from failure to override Stump’s opposition, the SSI Extension Act (H.R. 4716) was introduced during the last days of the session, in October 1998, and was then re-introduced in the newly elected 106th Congress early the next year. The Extension Act allowed “Filipino-American” World War II veterans currently receiving SSI to continue to receive those payments in the Philippines after certain reductions. The Act was then incorporated into the Foster Care Independence Act (H.R.1802) and substantially discussed in the Subcommittee on Human Resources of the House Committee on Ways and Means.

At House hearings held in February 1999, Eric Lachica argued that the Act would provide humanitarian relief for an estimated 7,000 elderly Filipino-American veterans “who are poor, lonely, and isolated in the United States, and are financially unable to petition their families to immigrate to the United States, and therefore, want to rejoin them in the Philippines.” He also put emphasis on the effects of reducing the current SSI payment for those veterans, saying “it would save the American taxpayers millions of dollars annually in SSI,

Medicaid, and food stamp payments” (HCWM 1999). The Act was welcomed as “a very rare opportunity” for Congress and the Administration “to do the right thing and save money at the same time” (HCWM 1999).

With the strong endorsement of the Subcommittee Chairperson Nancy L. Johnson (R-Conn.), the bill was presented on the floor of the House and passed on June 25, 1999 by an overwhelming majority (380 to 6), which included Congressman Stump (*U. S. Congressional Record*, June 25, 1999, p. H4987). The bill was then referred to the Senate, and on November 19, 1999 the final form of the Foster Care Independence Act (H.R.3443) passed both Houses, and was signed into law (PL 106-169) by President Clinton on December 14 at the White House, in a ceremony proudly attended by Filipino veterans (ACFV 1999b).

On May 1, 2000, the first payment pursuant to Title VIII of the Foster Care Independence Act, “Special Benefits for Certain World War II Veterans,” was made to naturalized Filipino American veterans who had returned from the United States. As of January 2003, 2,781 of them took advantage of SSI payments in the Philippines (USDVA 2003), while over 12,000 veterans continue to stay on in the United States. Considerable numbers of veterans are expected to travel between two countries (SSA 2001). The reduction in the SSI payment was at 25 percent, resulting in a monthly sum of \$380 per month, which is certainly “a dignified income in Manila” today (ACFV 2000). Shortly after the first “special benefit” payment was made, the California Veterans Benefit Bill, a California state counterpart to the federal SSI Extension bill, passed the California State Assembly and was signed into state law in July 2000. It allows eligible Filipino naturalized veterans who live in California to collect benefits under the State Supplementary Program, which provides assistance to low-income disabled, blind, and elderly individuals, even if they choose to relocate to the Philippines. The average benefit received is \$215 a month (*Asian Week*, July 27-August 2, 2000).

The SSI Extension Act was indeed a turning point for the whole equity movement. Having been successful in securing a series of legislative measures for the Filipino naturalized veterans, the ACFV is confidently going forward with its realistic approach to improving Filipino veterans’ lives by lobbying for such additional remedial measures as the application of SSI extension law to widows and wives of Filipino veterans and the protection of the immigrant visa status of sons and daughters of the veterans (Lachica 2001). With a strong endorsement

of the ACFV, Senator Inouye introduced the Filipino Veterans' Benefits Improvements Act of 2001 (S.1042) in the 107th Congress. This bill addresses the health care concerns of Filipino veterans and distinguishes between naturalized and foreign veterans as well as their places of residence.

The ACFV's realistic "step-by-step" approach, however, has become the subject of criticism among not a few of local community activists because of its "success". A major critic is the SFVEC, which was organized almost at the same time as the SSI Extension Act passed Congress in November 1999. SFVEC attitudes towards the equity movement adhere more to the basic principle of "full veterans benefits for all the Filipino veterans." Quite naturally they expressed strong opposition to the SSI Extension Act, which for all intents and purposes encourages the veterans served by SFVEC to leave San Francisco for their homeland (Antonio 2001; Estrada 2001). As local community activists, they tend to prefer a more straightforward agenda, even if such a position raises a hurdle for them in the form of the ACFV's "piecemeal approach" with a tint of professional lobbying. In this context Tancinco advocates Rep. Gilman's Filipino Veterans Equity Act of 2001 (H.R. 491), a repetition of the original equity bill giving justice to all the Filipino veterans, and criticizes Inouye's bill as "another piecemeal legislation," saying "[t]he Filipino veterans are not begging for a piece of pie. The Filipino veterans are seeking justice!" (Tancinco 2001b).

The 2002 Empowerment Conferences

This section will discuss how the Filipino World War II veterans function as an emblem of the Filipino American community and how conflicting notions and strategies cast a shadow over the equity movement, by presenting some observations on the bi-annual "Empowerment Conference" of the National Federation of Filipino American Associations (NaFFAA), which was organized in 1997 as the voice of "Filipinos and Filipino Americans throughout the United States (NAFFAA 2004)." The NaFFAA offers the researcher the single most important opportunity to discover the most current Filipino American political formations, their empowerment strategies, and what priorities are being given to which community issues.⁴

⁴ I would like to take this opportunity to thank the NaFFAA and those who kindly allowed me to attend and observe the Fifth Empowerment and Filipino Global

Dual Empowerment Strategy

NaFFAA's Fifth Empowerment Conference was held from August 28th to 30th, 2002 in San Jose, California, a well-known national center of the IT industry with a considerable size of Filipino population, and was attended by more than 500 participants including major local community activists throughout the United States (excluding Hawaii). On August 31st the Conference moved to the Moscone Center, San Francisco's premier convention facility, to hold their first "Filipino Global Networking Conference," which was intended to be a gathering of global Filipino diasporas, but turned out to be mainly bi-national (Philippine-U.S.) in composition.

The dominant subject, political empowerment, aimed at getting at least one more candidate of Filipino ancestry elected in the coming of 2002 mid-year election through bi-partisan efforts on the part of local Filipino communities. Many of the invited speakers were politicians and public officials, mostly native-born and 1.5 generation Filipino Americans, including Mayors Henry Manayan of Milpitas City and Mike Gingona of Daly City (both native-born), State Assemblyman Jeff Coleman from Pennsylvania (whose mother is from Mindoro), Velma Veloria from Washington (who was eleven years old at the time of US entry), and White House associate council and special assistant to the president Noel Francisco (who was one year old at the time of entry). Despite different party affiliations, all the speakers spoke in unison about such dreams as Filipino empowerment in the United States and making a difference for betterment of the community and the nation.

Predominance of naturalized Filipino Americans, however, has in many ways shaped both conferences. The Philippine national flag was hoisted along with the Stars and Stripes at every meeting and the participants sang both the Philippine and the United States national anthems at every event, singing the former louder and with much more fervor. Community issues recurrently discussed at the conferences are mostly related to interests of Filipinos in the United States other than the "native born" population, including the Filipino World War II veterans' and the job crisis for non-citizen Filipino airport workers brought about by a Congressional act passed in the aftermath of the September 11th terrorist incident that requires all airport security personnel to be U.S.

Networking Conferences held in 2002. However the descriptions of these conferences appearing in this paper are the sole responsibility of its author and do not ~~and they~~ represent the opinions of the NaFFAA or any other conference participant.

citizens. In addition to taking up such issues that affect the welfare of less protected non-naturalized members of the community, two remaining issues recurrently discussed were demands directed not to the United States but to the Philippines; namely, a dual citizenship bill and the absentee voting rights bill, both of which were under consideration in the Philippine Congress.

The conferences invited such dignitaries from the Philippines as the First Husband Jose Miguel Arroyo on behalf of the President, Senate President Frank Drilon, sponsor of the dual citizenship bill, and Congressman Augusto Sijuco, sponsor of the absentee vote bill. In his speech, Sijuco stated, "you are the only hope of the country today," while Department of Tourism Secretary Richard Gordon asked the audience to send more Filipino Americans for balikbayan visits for the success of WOW Philippines project. These speeches were greeted with such shouts from the audience as "Dual Citizenship Now!" "Absentee Vote Now!," indicate that the conferences were as much rallies for the two Philippine bills as stumping for the coming mid-year U.S. elections. In other words, the Filipino American community movement at the beginning of the 21st century reflects an interest in "dual empowerment," both in the United States and in the Philippines.

It seemed to this observer that the immigrant and the "native-born/1.5 generation" Filipino Americans are allowing each other to advocate their respective agendas, cheering each other, while they aim at very different directions. In other words, they tolerate their diversity within to be united as an ethnic group, since the dual empowerment strategy is considered complementary to each agenda. The "native born" Filipino Americans, who are of course more interested in their empowerment in the United States, can turn their being Filipinos into a political asset only with the numerical and economic support of naturalized Filipino Americans, while both naturalized and non-naturalized Filipino immigrants must rely on the "native born/1.5 generation" who could be elected to public office in the United States in the pursuit of improving their welfare in the United States.

Even if the dual empowerment strategy could be conceived as complementary within the community, it is quite a different matter when such duality is exposed to the outside. The facts that the both conferences attracted VIPs from the Philippines may indicate that the dual empowerment strategy is accepted in the Philippines, but if it is highlighted too much, however, duality could potentially make both sides vulnerable to suspicions of their respective

mainstream societies. It is therefore necessary for community activists to proceed very carefully in order to avoid potential conflicts in their pursuit of dual empowerment. In this regard, the Filipino World War II veteran's equity issue, the one which seemingly has most easily gained the sympathy of mainstream society, is actually one of the most sensitive issues that could provoke antagonism, as the following sections will show.

Heroes Honored

Both the empowerment conference in San Jose and the Filipino Global Networking Conference in San Francisco treated Filipino World War II veterans with the highest honor and gratitude as the single most important emblem for the whole Filipino community in the United States, large banner with the image of veterans photographed by Rick Rocamora was placed at the front of the conference hall, while the veterans themselves, accompanied by companions dressed in Stars and Stripes, started off the program with the presentation of the Colors. One non-Filipino speaker, himself a Vietnam veteran and San Jose city council member, handed the Flag to one of the Filipino veterans, saying that it was waved in Afghanistan by his daughter, who is in the Air Force. At the Filipino Global Networking Conference, the USDVA Secretary Anthony Principi was invited to speak as highest ranking [guest from the Bush](#) Administration. The Secretary praised the veterans and announced several new policies initiated by the Administration to improve their care. Loida Nicolas Lewis, the NaFFAA's newly appointed National Chairperson, closed her remarks by chanting "What do we want? Equity! When do we want it? Now!" While known as one of the most successful Filipino Americans in the business world, she is also the author of *How the Filipino Veteran of World War II Can Become a U.S. Citizen*, published by Bookmark (Lewis 1992).

In the United States, World War II veterans have been widely recognized among every ethnic minority group as an emblem of their patriotic contribution to the nation. One of the most successfully represented might be Japanese-American veterans (aka "Go for Broke" Soldiers), who went to the frontlines directly from their interment camps in the United States. The success of the Japanese redress movement shows how effectively the stories of minority veterans, especially of World War II, can afford ethnic minorities one effective way to protest against and seek justice for the racial discrimination they have suffered, without contesting American patriotism, but rather using to their own ends. It therefore is very natural for Filipino American activists to view the

Japanese American redress movement as an important model in their struggle for equity and recognition.

Heroes Forgotten

Those who are referred in the movement as "Filipino World War II veterans" do have at least one aspect which separates them completely from other Asian minority veterans: that is, they are not soldiers who went to a foreign war from the United States (interment camp or not), but rather enlisted, served and fought on their own Philippine soil. This a point that also separates them the small numbers of Filipinos who like other Asian American veterans went to the front from their homes in the United States in the Filipino First and Second Infantry Regiments. These Filipino veterans belonged mostly to either the prewar "manong" immigrant in the continental United States or second generation Filipinos born in Hawaii. The majority of the "manongs" were already too old to see actual combat, while many of the latter were as young as the other Asian American soldiers fighting on the battlefield. After their training, Regiment members 38 years or older were dispatched to civilian jobs in factories and fields on the mainland suffering from a shortage of workers (Philip Vera Cruz was one of them). The younger troops were sent to the Asia-Pacific front and engaged in actual combat, while others took part in rescue missions in war-damaged Philippines, such as Philippine Civil Affairs Units.

Filipino-American community historians like Fred Cordova and Alex Fabros, Sr. have long endeavored to study and the publicize history of these Regiments, which remained relatively unknown compared to the other Asian-Americans who fought in World War II (Cordova 1983; Takaki 1994). They are of the opinion that the soldiers of the "manong" generation should be honored on the same level as Japanese-American veterans, despite the quiet, sober roles they might have played in the war effort. When Fred Cordova was invited to speak at the Filipino Global Networking Conference as the most respected community historian, he nevertheless had to lament that the story of the Filipino First and Second regiments had been "almost forgotten among activists." He was frustrated that the history of the "manong" veterans in the community memory has all but been upstaged by another group of Filipino war veterans in recent years.

There might be several reasons for the current under-publicity of the "manong" veterans within the Filipino-American community, one being that the naturalization benefits provided by the 1940 nationality act was fully applied to

the "manong" veteran, enabling most of them to become U.S. citizens as early as in 1943. Another reason is the complete absence of discrimination against them as the U.S. war veterans, enabling them to obtain old age pensions, free medical care at veteran's hospitals, etc. with absolutely no red tape. It was during the years of protest against the Vietnam War that the young Filipino community activists rediscovered "manongs" as the emblem of community movement at the time, while the images of manongs as war veterans might have not been so attractive at the time as now.

However, probable the more important reason for the present invisibility of "manong" veterans within the present day movement is that community activists are mostly naturalized Filipino immigrant, who knows little about the activities of the "manong" veterans in the United States over a half century ago, while as Filipino-born were educated thoroughly about long commemorated bravery of the Filipino soldiers who served in the USAFFE and anti-Japanese guerrilla movements and became national heroes, or mga bayani, in the postwar Philippine society. Fred Cordova's misgivings may indicate a lack of shared memory between "native born" and immigrant Filipino-Americans, resulting in a fragmented community heritage.

Ang Bayan Ko

While Cordova's point out about the fragmentation of community memory poses a significant question, a split within the movement among community activists appeared even more serious and urgent. During the Filipino Global Networking Conference, the ACFV and SFVEC held separate workshops in next-door halls, "recruiting" veterans in spite of being asked by NaFFAA executives to maintain a unified front. The SFVEC successfully secured the vast majority of the veterans by starting its events earlier in the morning and providing free Jolibee lunches. During the afternoon sessions, Eric Lachica of ACFV entered the SFVEC workshop and argued the fruitfulness of his organization's "step by step" strategy, while Rick Rocamora rebutted that the ACFV was confusing the veterans by pretending its achievements meant that they were now eligible for monetary compensations as veterans' benefits, which was not true. Tancinco emphasized that SFVEC's position would not change in demanding nothing less than the repeal of the 1946 Rescission Act and recognition that all Filipinos who fought for the United States in World War II are entitled to the benefits enjoyed by U.S. World War II veterans eligible for any veterans benefits, regardless of nationality or present location of residence.

Eric Lachica of the ACFV had worked for Raul Manglapus when the latter was in exile in the United States during the years of martial law and a member of one of the anti-communist factions in the anti-Marcos movement, while Rick Rocamora in an interview with me made reference to Francisco Nemenzo as his mentor, and his photographic work clearly shows a strong commitment to the less privileged peoples of the Third World. Like Rocamora, many of the Filipino-American community activists working for the impoverished veterans were former left-wing student activists in the anti-Marcos movement. Barbara Gaerlan discusses that serious political infighting involving the anti-Marcos movement casts quite a shadow on the Filipino community movement today, going as far as to hamper internal unity (Gaerlan 1999). Though neither the ACFV nor the SFVEC makes any connection of past experiences to the present division of opinion over the veterans issue, it is quite possible that the equity movement is indeed being affected by political affiliations during past struggles (Lachica 1999; Rocamora 2001).

A great gulf exists between the two in the ways each uses the patriotic images reflected by the veterans. The ACFV preferred to hoist only the Stars and Stripes at their workshop and Eric Lachica was wearing a Stars and Stripes tie. The invited speakers were from the USDVA, the Republican Party, and high Filipino-American officials in the U.S. Armed Forces. While one senses a lack of total commitment to the current tide of patriotism in the United States, since the ACFV's greatest success so far is the SSI extension, which encourages the veterans to either go back home or come and go as they—in other words, to live a transnational life. The ACFV is nevertheless currently riding high on that tide, due mainly to its success in “Americanizing” of veterans issue.

On the other hand, the SFVEC hoisted both the Stars and Stripes and the Philippine national flag at its workshop, playing a recorded version of the Star-Spangled Banner, while singing the Lupang Hinirang with a fiddler's sentimental accompaniment. At the end of morning session, they distributed the lyrics to “Ang Bayan Ko” and sang acappella while the veterans were marching out of the hall to the larger main conference hall to join the procession for the Global Networking Conference. “Ang Bayan Ko” was a song sung secretly in protest during the Japanese Occupation, but was originally composed in 1928 as a song for national independence in the face of U.S. colonial rule. It was later sung in protest of the “U.S.-Marcos dictatorship” during the years of martial law (Tiongson 1994, 228-229). Thus it seems to this author to be a scene revealing

such sentiments shared among Filipinos in the Philippines as nationalistic contention with the United States, which is not portrayed as the promised land, but rather as a former colonist and current neo-colonial power shaping the Filipino past and present *in both homes*. It was in this way that the World War II veteran participants were represented not so much as American minority patriots as Filipino victims.

With respect to this sort of sentiment shared among Filipinos residing in the United States, Joel Bander, a non-Filipino civil rights activist leading the equity movement in Los Angeles, made the frank remark that “anti-American attitudes and strategies practiced in the American arena are the death knell to success.” (Bander 1998, 26). One can read Bander’s warning as evidence of how strong the social pressure still is to assimilate to American society.

It should also be mentioned that the Filipino World War II veteran’s equity issue itself has long been a problem of the U.S. government’s liquidation of its liability to a former colony and its people, which brings into the picture an aspect quite different from other Asian-American issues, like redress for Japanese-Americans, demanding apologies and compensation for past discrimination suffered inside the United States. Regarding the latter solely intra-American issues, a patriotic reasoning can be employed, such as “the justice they demand will make America a greater society,” while regarding the former colonial-related matter, what the victims demand basically adds up to a settlement of the business of decolonization. Therefore, despite how well-informed he was on the issue at hand, Bander’s recommendation may well be interpreted as advice to Filipino-Americans to forget what the equity movement is really about and concentrate on making America a greater society through justice. While the ACFV seems to have taken his advice, the singing of “Ang Bayan Ko” at the SFVEC’s workshop gives us a glimpse of the tenacity of Filipino nationalism, which imbued the issue originally and was carried by immigrants to the U.S. all the way from the Philippines.

Conclusion: Empowerment or Penetration?

Many of the characteristic features of Filipino-American discussed here, including the predominance of the naturalized immigrant population in that community, a difficulty in sharing community memory, a transnational way of life and dual strategies of empowerment, might be more or less commonly found

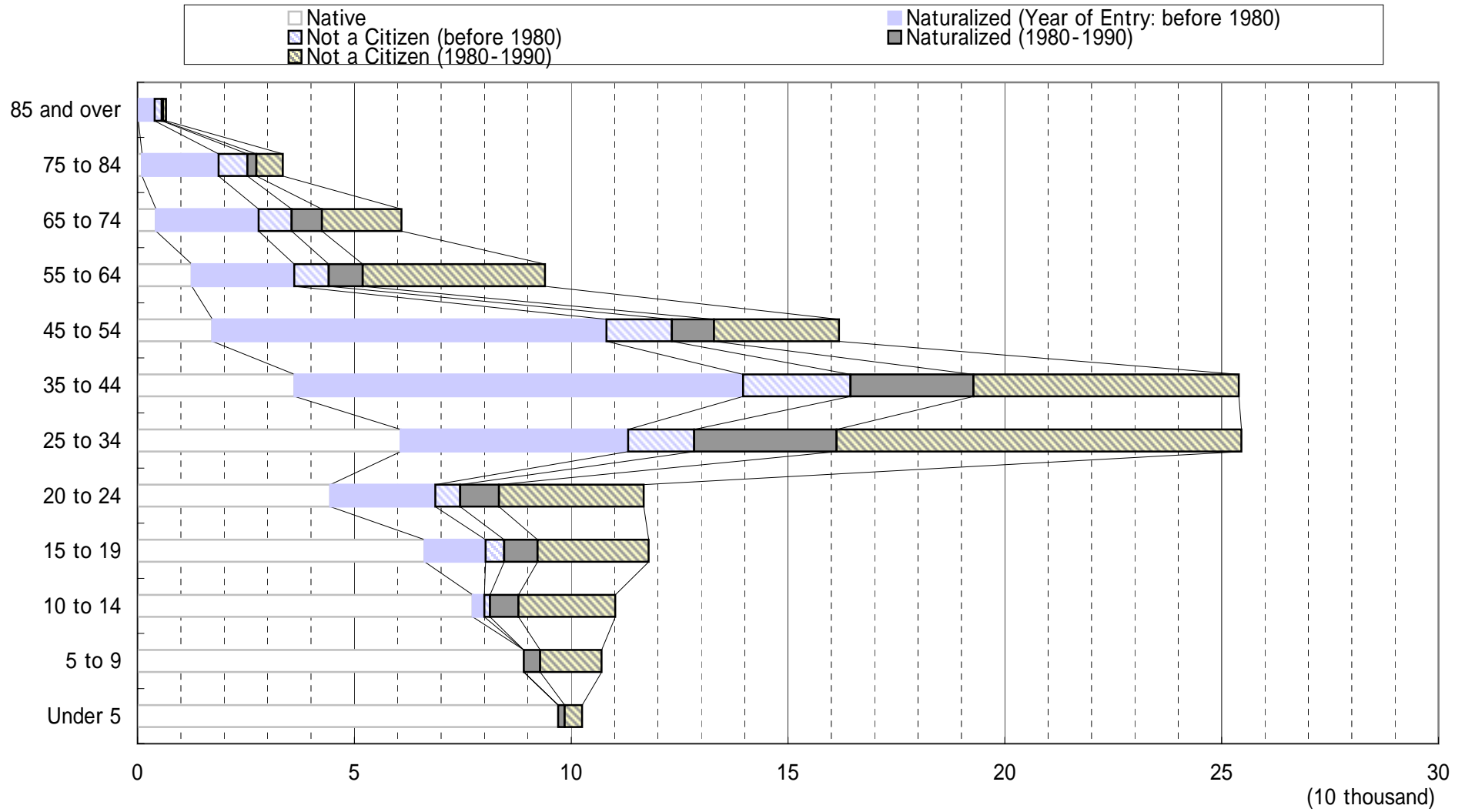
among those ethnic groups in the United States that have rapidly increased since the 1965 immigration act was passed. On the other hand, Filipino Americans are unique in terms of being a people who are bound to the United States by virtue of their colonial past. As the scene of Filipino-Americans singing "Ang Bayan Ko" implies, there is no escape from ambiguity when Filipinos tell their story about being American.

This may partly explain why the majority of Filipino-Americans, whether successful in business and social life or not, do not actively seek political empowerment as an ethnic minority but rather choose to remain "invisible." Is it because they are conscious that such an effort could provoke ambiguous, or even conflicting, memories not only within their own community, as shown in the split between ACFV and SFVEC, but also within mainstream society, as warned by Joel Bander? Could there be an awareness that as a former colonial people under of the United States, which dislikes acknowledging the fact, Filipinos could effectively pursue their interests, which seem directed at not so much empowerment, but rather "quiet penetration." Even those community activists seeking ethnic empowerment share much in common with their less active comrades in terms of being immigrants themselves or the descent of immigrants who chose American citizenship as a way out of something they did not want: not by employing collective means (i.e., national independence/national development), but individual ones (i.e., becoming Americans).

Nevertheless, such a choice does not mean Filipinos are helplessly absorbed in a maelstrom of assimilation into American society. Quite the contrary, many are successfully penetrating mainstream society while maintaining a transnational way of life. In this regard, the images projected by the Filipino World War II veterans, who came to the United States with the intention to sending part of their SSI allotments back home, as now perfectly happy to return home and receive their SSI checks there, certainly deserve to stand as an appropriate symbol of a group of people who do not seem to have been truly absorbed either by the Philippine or U.S. systems of national integration, despite being neatly attired in emblems of patriotism identifiable in either country.

Figure 1 Filipino Population in the United States in 1990

Source: USBC 1993, 10-11.



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