William Howard Taft and the Question of Philippine Independence, 1900-1913.

Please note that this paper is a written version of an oral presentation given at the BAAS Conference at Edinburgh University on March 29th 2008- the only references included are for direct citations.

This paper focuses on the role of William H. Taft in the debates surrounding the relationship of the United States to the Philippine Islands following the Spanish-American War and the U.S. assumption of sovereignty over the islands. The paper represents ongoing work for my PhD thesis, which deals with Taft’s role in U.S.-Far Eastern policy during the period 1900-1921, and I would be grateful for any suggestions of where I might want to further develop my arguments or other avenues that it would be beneficial to explore.

I will begin by briefly contextualising Taft’s role in the Philippines debate during the period 1900-1913. Taft arrived in the Philippine islands in June of 1900 at the head of the second U.S. commission to the Philippines, with the aim of establishing U.S. civil government in the islands to replace military rule. From July 4th 1901 until the end of 1903 Taft acted as the first civil governor of the islands before returning to the U.S. as President Roosevelt’s Secretary of War, a post in which he served until successfully running for the presidency in 1908. During this entire period Taft associated himself closely with the issue of Philippine independence, or rather with the message that the Philippines should not – under any circumstances – be promised independence at any point in the foreseeable future.

The primary focus of this paper is to analyse the development of a clear anti-independence policy on the part of Taft in relation to the ultimate fate of the
Philippines, while remaining vague about what the ultimate fate of the islands would be. This paper aims to show that Taft, during this period, developed a system in which discussion of outright Philippine independence from the United States was heavily restricted and discouraged, as Taft believed independence was a question for the long-term and not the short-term. In addition to this, Taft left open the question of whether the Philippines would ever become independent, choosing instead to keep his ultimate aims deliberately ambiguous, to the extent that – initially, at least – he would not even discount the idea that the islands might one day become a state of the union. What I argue is that Taft’s vagueness about the eventual statehood or independence of the islands was not due to indecision, but rather the only route he saw fit to establish the U.S. led civil government in the short-term. In addition to this, I will go on to argue, Taft wished to tie the Philippines to the United States economically, culturally and through its democratic institutions, to an extent that in time the Philippines would have a number of strong, permanent links to the U.S. and would choose to remain in some sort of formal association with the United States.

To begin, it is useful to briefly outline the legal status of the islands in relation to the United States when Taft arrived in 1900. The Philippines had been annexed by the United States following victory in the 1898 Spanish-American War. Over the next few years Filipino revolutionaries fought against the same U.S. forces who had helped overthrow the Spanish for their independence, though slowly this resistance was quashed. During this time there was much debate as to the status of the Philippines within the United States. Imperialists and anti-imperialists alike were largely against the idea of statehood – which was, to that point in time, the natural destiny for annexed U.S. territories – given a fairly widespread distaste for the addition of a state so populous that was also non-white. Therefore, a series of Supreme Court decisions
collectively known as the Insular Cases established that the Philippines, unlike previous annexed territories were to be designated instead an “unincorporated” territory. The key difference in this new status was that as a result the Philippines were no longer bound by precedent in relation to their ultimate status, particularly on the issue of statehood. This anomalous official status in regard to the Philippines allowed Taft to plough ahead with his scheme of bringing the Philippines closer to the United States, without any need to make clear when or if the Philippines would become independent.

What was clear from the very beginning was that, upon arrival, Taft was entirely sure of one factor: the Philippines were not ready or capable of becoming independent any time soon. During his time in the Philippines Taft wrote numerous lengthy letters to Secretary of War Elihu Root detailing the minutiae of the day-to-day running of the islands punctuated by his more general conclusions about the Filipinos as a whole. In such letters Taft concluded the Philippines were, ‘utterly unfit for self-government,’¹ and that ‘an independent government of Filipinos would produce a condition worse than hades.’² In a letter to his brother Horace, Taft revealed that even the promise of some distant future independence was not going to be coming at any point in the near future as he claimed that such a promise would ‘destroy the possibility of tranquillity and peace during a period long enough to prepare the self-government contemplated.’³ In short, even a promise of future independence was a step too far, too fast. From such statements we can be assured that Taft was against the idea of independence for the Filipinos at any time in the foreseeable future. Given this- one can therefore look at what exactly Taft did think of as the possible nature of U.S.-Filipino relations in the short to medium term.

¹ WHT to Root, August 18th 1900, William Howard Taft Papers 8:463 [Microfilm].
² WHT to Root, August 31st 1900, WHTP 8:463.
³ WHT to Horace Taft, April 12th 1901, WHTP 1:19.
In a letter to Supreme Court Justice Marshall Harlan written in June 1900, Taft claimed that Filipinos needed ‘the training of fifty or a hundred years before they shall realize what Anglo-Saxon liberty is.’ This estimate – of up to a century – was not a timetable for independence, but rather an estimate for how long it would take the Filipinos to achieve full, responsible self-government. In essence, Taft believed that the United States would be more or less in control of the islands for up to a century. This, more than any other issue, seemed to be something that Taft had very clear plans for. Taft, as noted above, felt that mere talk of independence or a promise of eventual independence would ruin his immediate aim – the establishment of a stable government in the short-term. Taft felt that if independence were clearly the policy of the United States, it would forever be a thorn in the side of his efforts to establish a stable civil government, and more importantly undermine his desire to build very close ties between the U.S. and the Philippines.

During his time in the Philippines Taft followed a number of what he believed to be pragmatic short-term policies to bring about Filipino support for U.S. rule and end the ongoing resistance from Filipino independence activists- this policy is often termed the “policy of attraction”. This policy involved three key themes. Firstly, Taft would encourage limited Filipino participation in government, mostly at lower provincial levels and later, and more controversially, including three Filipinos on the U.S. controlled governing Commission. Second, Taft saw to it that advocacy of independence was legally hampered with short-term sedition laws stunting the ability of any pro-independence movement. And finally, Taft showed significant bias in political support and patronage of the Filipino Federal Party, a party that opposed independence and even initially supported statehood.

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Perhaps the best source of evidence for Taft’s calculated vagueness in relation to the future of the Philippines came in 1902 when Taft was called before a Senate investigative committee headed by Massachusetts pro-imperial senator, Henry Cabot Lodge. The committee was set up primarily to investigate allegations of war crimes in the Philippine-American conflict. However, in his testimony before the Senate Committee, Taft also gave a fairly full picture of his ideas on what the future would hold for the anomalous relationship between the Philippine Islands and the United States. Firstly, Taft stated, a government had to be established under American guidance, ‘under which the Filipinos shall gradually improve their knowledge of what is individual liberty and what is a constitutional government, and subsequently the time will come when the United States and the Filipino people together can agree upon what their relations shall be.’\(^5\) This statement seemed to suggest that Taft supported the idea that the Filipinos would have a say in their future, but this was undercut slightly by the idea that this would be a discourse on their future with the United States. Whether Taft genuinely thought the Philippines might one day become a state of the union, which was in the platform of his favoured Federal Party, or whether he simply left this matter unresolved so as to allow the Federal Party not to look foolish, is difficult to ascertain. What seems likely is that Taft, more than anything else, was keen to keep the end deliberately unclear, and therefore what one must then understand is why Taft would choose to do this. By leaving the ultimate fate of the islands unclear Taft aimed to: dampen hopes for a definite date for independence, strengthen the hopes of the minority who sought eventual statehood, and thus leave himself with the ambiguity necessary to continue to reinforce his

favoured policy of bringing the Philippines closer to the United States. The purpose of this, one might argue, was allow time to improve and strengthen political and economic ties to such an extent that when it was eventually decided by the Americans that the time had come for a decision, outright independence would be less popular and less conceivably achievable among the Filipino people. Indeed, Taft added in his testimony that the U.S. should remain in the islands until the Filipinos ‘rise to call the name of the United States blessed.’\textsuperscript{6} This answer suggested that Taft believed the Filipinos would only be ready to make a decision on independence once they were convinced of how benevolent the United States really was. Essentially, the Filipinos would be ready to decide their future when they had come to see the world as Taft did and agreed with him.

After Taft left the Philippines at the end of 1903 to become Roosevelt’s new Secretary of War he maintained close ties to Philippine policy as the Bureau of Insular Affairs, which dealt with the administration of the Philippines, was within the Department of War. Although no longer directly in control of Philippine affairs on a day-to-day basis, the new Secretary of War stuck to his previous line of thought, telling the \textit{World Magazine} in 1904 that: ‘THE GREAT MISTAKE THAT COULD BE MADE AT THIS TIME WOULD BE TO GIVE THE FILIPINOS THEIR INDEPENDENCE, OR EVEN TO MENTION A TIME WHEN WE ARE LIKELY TO GIVE THEM THEIR INDEPENDENCE. I DON’T HESITATE TO SAY THAT TO HINT THAT WITHIN SO MANY YEARS OR AT THE END OF SUCH-AND-SUCH A PERIOD THEY WOULD BECOME INDEPENDENT, WOULD BE A TERRIBLE MISTAKE,’ the reporter noted that he spoke in capitals.\textsuperscript{7} Despite his continued advocacy of the retention of the Philippines on a long term basis, many

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., p. 36-7.
\textsuperscript{7} \textit{World Magazine}, February 8\textsuperscript{th} 1904, WHTP 17:623.
figures were starting to question the wisdom of maintaining a presence in the islands even within the short- to medium-term. An oft-quoted letter from President Roosevelt to Taft in 1907 revealed that even the pro-imperialist Roosevelt was open to the idea that an American presence in the Philippines might have to be scaled back due to public opinion and strategic concerns, describing the archipelago from a defensive point of view as the United States’ ‘heel of Achilles.’

Roosevelt wrote Taft that he wished ‘our people were prepared permanently…to assume the control of the Philippine Islands for the good of the Filipinos…[but] I gravely question whether this is the case….’ If this were not enough evidence that Roosevelt was starting to have second thoughts, he continued, ‘I think we shall have to be prepared for giving the islands independence of a more or less complete type much sooner than I think advisable.’ However, regardless of Roosevelt’s impending sense that independence was an issue that was almost inevitably approaching sooner rather than later, Taft continued to speak for retention of the islands throughout the following years when he rose to the presidency as Roosevelt’s heir.

The closest Taft came to guaranteeing the Philippines ultimate independence was neatly summarised in a speech he made to the National Education Association in 1910. This speech almost inevitably stressed his ongoing promotion of U.S. tutelage of the Filipinos before any decisions on independence should even be considered. Taft suggested that: ‘When the time shall arrive in which the Filipinos can be safely trusted to organize and maintain permanently their own Government, and this Government shall withdraw from the islands or offer to do so, the proposition of the Declaration of Independence will then have been fulfilled and the Government will be

8 TR to WHT, August 21, 1907, ERP Box 166 [Special Correspondence (WHT)].
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
a just one, for it will rest on the consent of the governed.' What is important about this seeming promise is the subtle use of the phrase ‘this Government shall withdraw from the islands or offer to do so’. Taft once more seemed to be arguing that there may come a point in the future when if the Filipinos reached a U.S. determined level of ability to form a U.S. determined suitably democratic government, then the result might not have to be independence at all. Rather the Filipino themselves, when fully capable of self-government, might wish to stay under U.S. sovereignty.

Despite various speeches on the subject of continued progress in the Philippines and maintenance of the status quo there, Taft was not really caused to bring the issue of independence to the forefront of policy. At least this was the case until the realisation that the long un-interrupted period of Republican dominance in the White House, dating back to the beginning of U.S. involvement in the Philippines, had come to an end with the 1912 election of Democratic candidate Woodrow Wilson. Shortly after this election Taft began to use his lame duck presidency as a platform from which to denounce Democratic policy for the Philippines.

The incoming Democrats were closely linked to the policy of Philippine independence, which had been associated with their party platform since annexation of the islands over a decade before. The most important piece of proposed legislation during this period was the Jones Bill, which aimed to provide a guarantee of independence, and in it earliest forms a date for independence within the coming decade. From this time onwards Taft became the most high-profile spokesperson of what became seen as a “retentionist” campaign against Democratic Party plans for such a promise of independence.

By the end of 1912 the *New York Times* reported: ‘The President made no secret of his intention to fight the Jones bill with all his might, whether in the Presidential office or out of it. He had said that he would veto it should the bill be passed by both houses before his term ends.’\(^{12}\) Taft went on to promise that were the Jones bill or similar raised when the Democrats took control of Congress and the presidency then he would direct a propaganda campaign with the object of preventing the Filipinos from obtaining independence.\(^{13}\) In late 1913 the *Washington Post* reported Taft as declaring that, ‘for the American government to promise within any definite time to give them independence was “very foolish.”’\(^{14}\)

What is particularly noteworthy about Taft’s policy towards Philippine independence is its consistency in the face of adversity. Some commentators might well take Taft’s stubborn adherence to opposing independence as the sour-grapes of bitter partisanship from a lame duck president. Others, including the *Washington Post* at the time, agreed with Taft that independence too soon would prove fatal for the very ideals with which the pro-imperial annexationists has been garnishing their rhetoric for the previous decade or so. Overall, neither picture seems to quite sum up Taft’s position. Taft’s widely known goal by the end of this period was a seat on the U.S. Supreme Court, and he was unlikely to be a presidential candidate in the future given his landslide failure in 1912 and his own declarations that he would not run again. In short, Taft had little to gain by continuing to spearhead a retentionist campaign beyond his time in office. Nevertheless, this is precisely what he did. What seems clear when one looks at the broader scope of Taft’s approach to Philippine independence, is that Taft seemed to genuinely hold out some hope that the Philippines might grow so attached to the United States following several decades of

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14 *Washington Post*, November 15\(^{th}\) 1913.
benevolent imperialism that their links to the U.S., somewhat like those of Puerto Rico today, might remain in place in the long term for the mutual benefit of both countries.