

# Filipino Reporter

**FAIR, FEARLESS, FACTUAL**

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For once in a very long time, Filipino-Americans have come upon an occasion where they find genuine reason to exult. A major bill providing for the naturalization of Filipino war veterans now sits on the desk of the US president, awaiting his stamp of approval.

To many, the bill is as good as signed; even before Congress marked its final passage, Bush had reportedly given his commitment to it.

This victory for our war heroes cannot be passed up lightly. It is a bittersweet reward, long in coming following over forty years of plodding through the bureaucracies of the US courts and the halls of Congress.

Since the end of the war, Filipino war veterans have taken up the fight to obtain what they perceived was their right. They have been denied due process of law and have since fought hard and long.

For the veterans, the road to justice oozed with minefields and traps such as they had known on the battleground. Thrice, the US District of Appeals (9th District) acted favorably on their side on the naturalization issue; thrice, the US Supreme Court overturned each decision.

## Background

Enough has been said of the history of this longstanding veterans issue. Many have chronicled the issue and analyzed developments as they unfolded. I, for one, have treated on the subject since the 70s, some of which saw publication in *The Common Law Lawyer* and this newspaper.

But for the sake of those now with the benefit of witnessing naturalization of aliens honorably serving in the armed

## CROSSCURRENTS

# At long last, vets prevail



By REUBEN S. SEGURITAN

forces of the United States. So it was that, from 1943 through 1946, the US deployed immigration officers to England, Iceland, North Africa and the Pacific, to naturalize aliens serving in the US military forces.

In the case of the Philippines, however, a US immigration officer set camp in Manila only in August 1945, following liberation from Japan. Filipino veterans, as it was, were a couple of years behind the naturalization race with other foreign nationals.

Worse yet, barely two months had passed and the naturalization authority vested upon Manila Vice Consul George Ennis, the appointed US officer, was revoked. Naturalization proceedings in Manila stopped immediately upon Ennis' receipt of the stop order.

The US believed that the suspension of naturalization service for Filipino veterans was an agreeable move aimed at propitiating the Manila administration who feared mass exodus of Filipinos to the US. At that time, Filipino leaders were beginning to entrench themselves in self-government to pave the way for the country's approaching independence from America under the Tydings-McDuffie Act.

As a result, the unforeseen interruption of service left thousands of naturalization cases—those filed already and those about to be filed—hanging in the air.

Nine months had passed before another naturalization officer was appointed in August 1946. Veterans scrambled to follow up on their cases, while others attempted the file new petitions. But for many of them, it was too late. The deadline for filing special naturalization petitions had come all too soon. Four months later, in December, 1946, naturalization processing ceased permanently.

It was the improbable suspension of US naturalization service in the Philippines for nine months, later termed in US courts as "affirmative misconduct" by the US government, that later conceived the painful legal struggles by Filipino veterans in the four decades that followed.

Until this major immigration reform of 1990, few legal cases auspiciously ruled in favor of Filipino war veterans. It had become such an arduous ordeal, riven with humiliating memories of legal defeat after defeat.

But victory has come. Though many who have move on to fight in the court and carry the wounds of injustice in their twilight years have since succumbed to life's Last Battle, many yet still remain and are never too old to savor one more taste of success.

## Lessons

The felicitous passage of the veterans bill which was incorporated into the

Immigration Reform Act of 1990 crystallizes a few lessons well worth our time to appraise and remember.

First, it pays to keep our friends in Congress and in the equally influential political circuit. There is infinite gain in the principle of friendship and visibility, acquiring savvy in nurturing social and political ties and returning the favors of their good will.

Magnanimous thanks are due to the principal sponsors—Senator Daniel Inouye and Rep. Mervyn Dymally. Also to the key supporters—Senators Edward Kennedy, Alan Cranston and Paul Simon and

Alan Simpson as well as Congressmen Howard Berman, Norman Mineta, Nancy Pelosi and Stephen Solarz.

We also owe a great deal to the energetic efforts of their assistants, including Marie Blanco, the Filipino-American in the office of Senator Inouye who, among other things, had been kind enough to provide Filipino-Americans, including myself, with information on the bill before and after its passage.

These congressional aides refined the bill to creditable perfection worth the nod of their bosses and the ardent

attention of the critical and busy men in Congress.

It would be ungrateful to overlook the valuable support in the past of other high ranking Americans like former INS Commissioner Leonel Castillo who, incidentally, is married to a Filipina. He paved the way for the naturalization of a handful of veterans in the late 70s.

Lesson two affirms that perseverance proves to be more than mere virtue. Persevering in the fight for one's rights, no matter how long it takes or the cost it exacts eventually gets us what we want and where we want to

go.

The dogged persistency of Filipino leaders and lobbyists over the years who fought alongside Filipino veterans in the courts and in Congress deserves our emulation. Filipino political leaders in California, Hawaii and New York have tirelessly promoted the Filipino cause and because of the likes of them, Filipino-Americans everywhere have attained for themselves no small political feat.

Finally, our victory with the passage of this bill can be said to be indicative of the emerging political influence of the Filipino community. It is not farfetched to suppose that other than the principle of justice, US lawmakers have found amongst us a cause worthy of taking up because of our increasing ubiquity and continuing political activity. It is not surprising thus to see that in states where Filipino communities have flourished quite immensely, namely Hawaii and California, the support for the veterans bill

had been most constant and vigorous.

Indeed, if there is any one thing worth noting on the passage of this bill into law, it is that, alas, American leaders can no longer ignore the voice of Filipino-Americans.

The Filipino veterans naturalization measure is not only a victory for our battle-weary, time worn veterans truly deserving of this long sought justice. Nor to the frazzled Filipino-American leaders and key men who have been in the forefront of the veterans cause all these years.

Above all, the conquest over time and injustice for our enfeebled veterans emboldens our aspirations and energy—of which countless times have flagged out of frustration—only to be restored once again.

The new measure is a miles tone and a trailblazer at the same time. It marks an important event that ended well, while heralding a bright hopeful era of political trading between Filipino Americans and US mainstream politicians.