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Manuel L. Quezon: The Hero We Forgot

"My loyalty to my party ends
where my loyalty to my country begins."

This is but an example of the eloquence of a man who, though short at 5"2" even for a Filipino, walked tall and proud as the "Father of the Philippine Republic." Manuel Luis Quezon did not live to see that republic formally born on July 4, 1946, but it was he who completed what Andres Bonifacio and his fellow Katipuneros started when they tore up their cedula at Pugadlawin on August 29, 1896, thereby signaling the start of the 1896 Philippine Revolution. It was Quezon who finally brought home the independence fought for and sought by that revolution, and it was also Quezon who, from 1909 till his death in 1943, steadfastly laid down the political foundation for the establishment of self-rule in our country.

We failed to recognize Andres Bonifacio, acknowledged as the "Father of the Philippine Revolution," as the Philippine National Hero, instead of Rizal, for much the same reason that we failed to recognize Manuel Quezon as the rightful "Father of Philippine Independence": because we allowed other nations to tell us who should and should not be our Heroes.

Marcelo Del Pilar, that indefatigable propagandist of a thousand pseudonyms, died of tuberculosis in Madrid, Spain - destitute, hungry, picking up cigarette butts in the streets to smoke to help forget his hunger, and committed till his very last breath to the propaganda campaign of the Philippine Revolution.

Like Del Pilar, Quezon died of tuberculosis while carrying on his campaign for Philippine independence in a foreign soil. Through the National Historical Committee, we have finally acknowledged Marcelo Del Pilar as one of our national heroes. However, we continue to overlook Quezon.

We Filipinos, as a nation, seem to forget a lot of things too easily. Such forgetfulness is a tuberculosis of the Filipino soul: it is a wasting disease that eats up our national identity.

Criteria for National Heroes

On November 22, 1995, the National Heroes Committee submitted to DECS Secretary Ricardo T. Gloria its recommendations as to the criteria for the selection of national heroes. The Committee was created by President Fidel Ramos through Executive Order No. 75, dated March 28, 1993. It was headed by Serafin Quiason as Chairman and Executive Director. Among its members are Onofre D. Corpuz, Carmen Guerrero-Nakpil, Dr. Samuel K. Tan, Dr.

Marcelino Foronda, Dr. Alfredo Lagmay, Dr. Bernardita Churchill, Dr. Isagani Medina, Eufronia Reaido of the DFA, Lt. Col. Virgilio Baes and Wenceslao Bulaong of the DND, Prof. Minerva Gonzales and Augusto De Viana of the NHI.

The NHC criteria are as follows:

1. Heroes are those who have a concept of nation and thereafter aspire and struggle for the nation's freedom.
2. Heroes are those who define and contribute to a system or life of freedom and order for a nation.
3. Heroes are those who contribute to the quality of life and destiny of a nation.

These criteria were proposed by Dr. Onofre Corpuz and formally adopted by the NHC Technical Committee during its first round-table discussion held on June 3, 1993.

In another round-table discussion held on November 15, 1995, the NHC Technical Committee further adopted the criteria submitted by Dr. Alfredo Lagmay, as follows:

1. A hero is part of the people's expression, but that process of a people's internalization of a hero's life and works takes time, with the youth forming part of that internalization.
2. A hero thinks of the future, especially the future generations.
3. The choice of hero involves not only the recounting of an episode or events in history, but of the entire process that made this particular person a hero.

Based on these criteria, the NHC finally selected nine (9) Filipino historical figures "to be declared as National Heroes": Jose Rizal, Andres Bonifacio, Emilio Aguinaldo, Apolinario Mabini, Marcelo Del Pilar, Sultan Dipatuan Kudarat, Juan Luna, Melchora Aquino and Gabriela Silang.

But, it may be asked, if Quezon was truly heroic, or truly worthy of being declared as a National Hero, how did the NHC manage to overlook him? The answer can be gleaned from a statement in the November 15, 1995 NHC Report, referring to the nine national heroes they had chosen:

"Each one of them played a distinct role in the revolutionary struggle... Into the making of the edifice of the First Philippine Republic went the untold hardships, supreme sacrifices and sufferings of many heroes..."

Apparently, the NHC, like most other Filipinos, restricted the timeframe of that revolutionary struggle: beginning with the "Cry of Pugadlawin" in 1896 and ending with Aguinaldo's declaration of the First Philippine Republic in 1898, thereby disqualifying other Filipino personages from consideration as a national hero. It is as if only those who fought heroically for Philippine independence against the Spaniards could be rightfully considered and proclaimed as a National Hero.

The truth, however, is that we had to carry on and carry out the national struggle for independence not only against the Spaniards but against Americans as well. In truth, it was only on July 4, 1946, that we finally won that struggle for independence, when US President Harry Truman, in a speech addressed to the American nation, acknowledged our independence as a nation.

In his book, "Betrayal in the Philippines," first written in 1946 and updated in 1960, Hernando Abaya pointed out that:

"America merely restored our freedom.
She could not grant what was not hers to give away."

The Tenth National Hero

If we had won self-rule outright in 1898, then it would be proper to limit the eligibility of heroes to the period within which the 1896 Philippine Revolution was carried out. But history makes it abundantly clear that the Americans, first through secret negotiations with Spain and later through the naked force of arms, craftily cheated us out of that hard-won and much-deserved triumph. It was thus left to other Filipino leaders to reclaim that victory and seal it for posterity.

There is one, and only one, Filipino who effectively laid down the foundations of that victory against supreme difficulties. That singular Filipino led the struggle in its transition: from the battlefields in the war against Spain to the political arena in the struggle against the United States, where it was finally won in 1946, thereby preserving the gains of the earlier war against Spain.

Among those who took over from the Katipunan and the Hukbalahap the torch-running task for Philippine independence, Manuel Quezon stood as a giant among mere mortals.

On May 10, 1920, he delivered his maiden speech to the US Congress. Acknowledging the benefits the Philippines had received from the US, Quezon insisted nonetheless:

"Despite it all, we still want independence."

The biblical David had only his slingshot against Goliath, and yet he stood up against the Philistine giant. Quezon had only his huge heroic heart and his unswerving vision, and yet he stood up to the Americans and told them: "Despite it all, we still want independence."

Had it not been blinded and led astray by a false timeframe, the NHC would surely have named Manuel Quezon as our 10th National Hero.

Heroism Here and Abroad

On July 30, 1907, Manuel Quezon was elected to the First National Assembly. Sergio Osmeña Sr. was elected by his peers as Speaker of the House. Quezon was elected as Floorleader and Appropriations Committee Chairman.

The year 1909 must be remembered as the turning point in Quezon's public life. It was then that he first distinguished himself as the foremost champion of Philippine independence by opposing the Payne-Aldrich bill pending in the US Congress. The bill proposed free trade between the United States and the Philippines. In opposing it, Quezon explained that America regarded the Philippines as a backward country that was to be aided and fattened in spite of itself, that it had become a profitable market for American goods, and that, for these reasons, America considered, or dismissed, the aspirations of the Filipino people to nationhood as unwise. It was a historic moment, golden in its unadorned directness, matched only by Andres Bonifacio's roar at Pugadlawin.

Thus, upon Quezon's motion, the National Assembly adopted a resolution urging against the passage of the Payne-Aldrich bill.

Some quarters contend that Quezon, upon the urging of Vice-Governor Forbes and in consideration of his own public career, quickly changed his mind. This is mere speculation or innuendo, as there is neither record nor proof whatsoever in support of it. Only the most decrepit imagination could construe the subsequent passage of the Payne-Aldrich bill, and the ramming of free trade down our national throat, as proof of Quezon's alleged change of mind.

Quezon was the first Filipino to see through the guise of friendship with which the United States masked its colonial designs on our country. The fact that the US Congress passed the bill anyway despite Quezon's opposition does not in any way diminish from his heroic stance.

In the same year, his peers in the First National Assembly elected Quezon to the post of Resident Commissioner of the Philippines to the United States. He arrived in Washington on December 24, 1909, and immediately sought to school himself in two languages: American English, and American Legislation.

He had finished his law studies in 1903 and was among the top ten in the bar exams of the same year. After a few months of apprenticeship in the Ortigas law office, he established his own practice and moved back to his home province of Tayabas, where he became known and loved for the free legal services he gave to the poor. Stints as Provincial Fiscal of Mindoro and, afterwards, of Tayabas further sharpened his legal acumen.

But in leading the cause of Philippine independence within the very halls of the US Congress itself, Quezon was treading uncharted territory. His law background was excellent, but he needed to learn a whole lot more. He knew that he was going where no Filipino had ever been before, that there were no guideposts for him to follow except his own unswerving commitment to the establishment of self-rule by Filipinos in the Philippines and his undaunted conviction in the Filipinos capability for self-governance.

In his maiden speech to the US Congress, he proudly declared: "If the pre-ordained fate of my country is either to be subject people but rich, or free but poor, I am unqualifiedly for the latter." That speech was his second golden moment, underscoring the consistency of his campaign for Philippine independence.

On August 16, 1916, a few days before his 38th birthday and in the last year of his tenure as

Resident Commissioner to the United States, and apparently anticipating its enactment on August 29, 1916, Quezon welcomed the Jones-Hitchcock bill:

"Heretofore we have been the least and the last factor in Philippine affairs. Hereafter we shall be the first and most important factor. Heretofore things were done by the Philippine government not only without the consent but on many occasions against the strong opposition of the Filipino people. Hereafter nothing will be done without our consent, much less in defiance of our opposition. This bill is a long and very decisive step toward the complete emancipation of the Filipino people."

The bill came to be known as the Philippine Autonomy Act of 1916 after it was signed into law by President Wilson. It provided for a 24-seat elective Philippine Senate, with the right to confirm appointments made by the US Governor-General in the country. Clearly, Quezon had a major if unseen hand from the bill's introduction in 1914 up to its reintroduction and subsequent passage in 1916.

Later in the same year, Quezon was elected as a Senator of the 5th Senatorial District and President of the Philippine Senate. From this post, he used the Legislature as a shield to protect our national interests as well as a prod to prepare our people for responsible self-government.

Denouncing the electoral frauds in the Bicol region, Quezon insisted:

"A thousand times better that the Sixth District should not be represented than that it be represented by men placed upon their seats by the black hands of detestable criminals."

Later on, opposing Governor-General Harrison's move to create new positions in the Philippine Constabulary, he registered a "most vigorous protest," pointing out that:

"It is the Legislature alone that has the power to create positions."

Through these declarations, Quezon was pushing beyond all doubt his intent to make of Philippine independence a living reality, not just a dream dressed in legal parlance but bereft of actual application. He was clearly not going to be content with mere pronouncements: he wanted the real thing and would settle for nothing less. This is a straight reading of Quezon's words, not just an interpretation of them.

This is why Quezon was sent by his peers to head the 1st Independence Mission to the United States. He sailed for Washington on December 9, 1918, marrying his cousin, Aurora, along the way in a church wedding at a Catholic cathedral in Hongkong on December 17.

This trip would bear fruit 16 years later, on March 24, 1934, in the form of the Tydings McDuffie Law.

Final Touches

In December 1931, Osmeña and Roxas left for Washington on another Independence Mission, better known as the OsRox Mission. This mission returned to the country in 1933, bearing the Hare-Hawes-Cutting Law and defending it as the best that could be obtained from the US

Congress. Overriding President Hoover's veto, the US Congress passed the law on January 17, 1933. Its one redeeming feature was that, in order for it to take effect, it had to be accepted first by the Philippine Legislature.

Eager for at least a semblance of independence after long years of waiting, the majority of the Philippine Legislature, as well as the majority of the Filipino people, were initially heavily inclined to accept the HHC Law.

Quezon refused it, as it called for the retention of American military bases in the country even after the proclamation of Philippine independence. Wielding his impressive powers of persuasion, and with the help of Sumulong, Recto and Paredes, Quezon went on to shift public opinion to his view. The Philippine Legislature thus, under Quezon's charismatic leadership, passed on October 1933 a concurrent resolution rejecting the HHC. A month later, Quezon was on his way back to Washington, on a mission to secure a more favorable independence law from the US Congress, and in defiance of Roxas's assertion that "Quezon cannot change even a comma of the HHC Law."

Six months later, on April 30, 1934, Quezon was back in the Philippines, bringing home the Tydings-McDuffie Law, which cut out the HHC provision regarding the retention of US bases on Philippine soil. The following day, the Philippine Legislature promptly accepted it.

That the Filipino people also accepted the Tydings-McDuffie Law was proven immediately after. In the June 1934 general elections, the Antis (those who opposed the HHC Law) won 8 of 11 seats in the Senate, 80 of 89 seats in the House, and 44 of 48 gubernatorial posts.

On July 30, 1934, Quezon formally opened the Constitutional Convention, with Claro M. Recto as President. On May 14, 1935, the Filipino people ratified the Constitution.

On September 17, 1935, the Filipino people showed its recognition of Quezon's heroic efforts by electing him as the 1st President of the Philippine Commonwealth.

In his inaugural address, Quezon enshrined his vision thus:

Under the Commonwealth, our life may not be one of ease and comfort, but rather of hardship and sacrifice. We shall face the problems which lie in our path, sparing neither time nor effort in solving them. We shall build a government that will be just, honest, efficient, and strong. So that the foundation of the coming Republic may be firm and enduring - a government, indeed, that must satisfy not only the passing needs of the hour but also the exacting demands of the future."

That the light of his leadership had not diminished was proven by his overwhelming reelection in 1941, even as the clouds of war were drifting over the Philippine horizon, and even as the tuberculosis was burrowing deeply into Quezon's body.

On June 14, 1942, Quezon made put in a finishing touch to the great canvass he had faithfully painted for over two decades: at a ceremony in the White House and in the presence of the representatives of the other Allied powers, Quezon signed, in the name of the Philippines, the United Nations Declaration. From then on, the Philippine flag was displayed alongside the flags of the Allied powers in all public functions.

Highlighting the significance of this, Osmeña said:

Under the leadership of President Quezon, the government of the Commonwealth functioned in Washington not only with the recognition of the United States, but of the other nations with which America is allied in this war. The Commonwealth, in a word, acquired an advanced political status because, anticipating the promised recognition of our independence, the American government has taken the steps to invest us with international personality. We were admitted to membership in the United Nations, and we were accorded a seat in the Pacific war council."

On August 1, 1944, in Saranac Lake, New York, Quezon finally lost his battle against tuberculosis, which he had been fighting almost for as long as he had been fighting for Philippine independence. By then, his legacy to Philippine nationhood was already sealed.

Manuel Roxas, the 1st President of the Republic, acknowledged as much at the funeral oration he delivered at the Legislative Building on July 28, 1946:

"We are a free people and a free nation, in large part, because of him. This Republic, its government and its institutions... are his perpetual monuments.... He led the way... to victory and finally to independence."

Epitaph for a Hero

Manuel Quezon did not set out to be a hero, much less a national hero. Nobody does. What he did was craft for himself a vision of an independent Philippines, and then dedicate his life to a full realization of that vision. It is that vision, coupled with that dedication, that makes him a hero.

It was not just an abstract vision -- generalized and indistinct, uninformed by realities, unclarified by specifics. His legal background and keen legal acumen, while probably disposing him towards a legal or legislative pursuit of his vision, nonetheless served him well in clarifying his vision, giving it formal contours and sharpening its structure: he dreamt of a sovereign Republic of the Philippines.

As early as 1909, he already had, if not the full vision, at least its essential core: that the Philippines would have to wrest it from America, that America would not give it to us on a silver platter.

Piece by legislative piece, he laid down the political and formal foundations of Philippine independence.

His stance, while never overtly anti-American, nevertheless proved to be consistently pro-Filipino. He did not call for war against the United States - clearly because that would have given her more justification in subjugating us, and because we were not in a position then to wage another war, much less to win one against a newly-established world power.

Along the way, he co-founded with Osmeña, Sandiko, Agoncillo and others, the Partido Nacionalista and, with it, the country's political party system. He envisioned and built, out of a huge rolling forest called Diliman, the city that was to be named after him - Quezon City - and appointed himself its 1st Mayor. He wanted the city to be a paradise for workingmen, a genuine

barrio obrero: with well-furnished dwellings, safe environs, and playgrounds for children. In his first term as President of the Commonwealth, he had the country's first minimum wage law enacted by the Philippine Legislature.

He gave the Philippines he so loved a full range of public services: as soldier, lawyer, fiscal, legislator, diplomat, advocate, national and local executive. Throughout it all, his commitment to Philippine independence never wavered.

His remains lie at the foot of a memorial built in his honor at the Quezon Memorial Circle on Elliptical Road, Quezon City. The epitaph on his tomb reads:

"Statesman and Patriot,
Lover of Freedom,
Advocate of Social Justice,
Beloved of his People."

Apparently, we have neither loved nor thanked him enough. If we did, that epitaph would have ended with a fifth line:

"National Hero."