

The Rockefeller Foundation and the Philippine Islands, 1913-1935

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The Rockefeller Foundation (RF) began its work on the American-colonized Philippine Islands in 1913. Engaging mainly in health and sanitation work, it built a strong partnership with the American insular government there and continued its charitable work long after Philippine independence in 1946. My research at the Rockefeller Archive Center focused on the RF's activities between 1913 and 1935. I looked specifically at its relationship with an increasingly Filipinized government to understand the role non-state actors played in this American colony. In that period the Foundation undertook two major projects previously unstudied by historians: a hospital ship and an overhaul of the public health education system.

The Foundation's work focused on improving public health in the Philippines. It began its programming in 1913 with a comprehensive survey of health conditions there. At the same time, they lured the Director of Health for the Philippine Islands, Dr. Victor G. Heiser, away from his government post to become the RF's director of the International Health Commission for the East. Heiser's previous experience in the Philippines meant that as a Director for the East he took a special interest in the archipelago.^[1] Thus, using his last months in office in 1914 as Philippine Director of Health and his newfound connections with the Rockefeller Foundation, he launched a joint project between the Philippine Insular Government, the RF, and the Episcopal Church: the Hospital Ship *Busuanga*. The \$44,000 hospital ship would travel through Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago to provide medical services in areas where medical dispensaries and hospitals were impossible to maintain due to geography. Once the ship was launched, Heiser checked on its progress regularly. But by 1919, the *Busuanga* proved too expensive and ineffective. The ship was ill-suited for that type of travel, poorly engineered, was dangerous in fair weather, and possibly deadly in the myriad of typhoons which regularly hit the archipelago. Therefore, in 1919 the Rockefeller Foundation ceased operation of the ship and reevaluated its own role on the islands.^[2]

By 1921, the U.S. government was also reevaluating its role in the Philippines. When Republican Warren Harding took the White House in 1921, he commissioned a study of possible Philippine independence. Former Governor-General of the Philippines W. Cameron Forbes, an ardent retentionist, and Leonard Wood would head the project. The Woods-Forbes report, completed that year, argued that the Philippines were completely unready for independence.^[3] The report explained how under Filipinization the country's infrastructure and social welfare system had fallen apart. This was why Filipinos were not ready for independence: they had destroyed the very social welfare programs designed by Americans to make the Philippines a self-governing nation. The report detailed the strict American control of the government until Filipinization in 1912. During that time, a "marked emphasis" was "placed upon the improvement of education

and construction of permanent improvements." [4] But since then, the report went on, the country's infrastructure, schools, and medical system had broken down, and thus the Philippines could not be left to its own devices, let alone independence. For Wood and Forbes, readiness for independence was measured not as much by defense systems as by social engineering; no country which neglected its social institutions could be ready for independence. Thus, declared the report, "It would be a betrayal of the Philippine people, a misfortune to the American people, a distinct step backward in the path of progress, and a discreditable neglect of our national duty were we to withdraw from the islands." [5] President Harding accepted and agreed with the findings, postponed independence, and appointed Leonard Wood Governor-General of the Philippine Islands.

Immediately following the Commission report, Wood and the Philippine government invited the RF's International Health Board to participate "in [the] development of medical and public health resources of the Philippines." [6] The International Health Board responded by sending an American nurse, Alice Fitzgerald, to the Philippines. Once there she completed a comprehensive survey of hospitals and medical education on the Islands. Finding a plethora of well-run private, missionary, and public, government-owned hospitals, she recommended that the RF not build new hospitals, but build on the existing infrastructure instead. The Rockefeller Foundation, she argued, should first encourage better cooperation between existing hospitals. Second, the Foundation should cooperate with the government to train a new cadre of Filipino medical personnel to run these institutions more efficiently. [7]

Thus Fitzgerald began a nurses' training school at the government-run University of the Philippines, Manila. She and Heiser agreed that trained, efficient, Filipina nurses were the best way to alter health conditions on the Islands. Because Fitzgerald believed that most health problems came from poor sanitation in homes and poor childrearing practices, the nation needed medical personnel specially trained to access Filipino families in their homes. Filipina nurses, she argued, might be the answer; they could more easily treat mothers and children, could gain access to homes to inspect sanitary conditions, and could appeal to a common womanhood to influence health practices. But in 1922, according to Fitzgerald, nurses were only trained to assist doctors in hospital settings. [8] To create this new kind of Filipina nurse who could affect disease control on a widespread basis, Fitzgerald began a "Course for Training Public Health Nurses" under the Department of Health in Manila. The program continued long after Fitzgerald left the Islands in 1926, remaining government-run and graduating students until at least 1932. [9] The Rockefeller Foundation remained strongly committed to it. Between 1922 and 1934, the RF awarded approximately 30 grants organized under 14 different categories ranging from agriculture to industrial hygiene. The Public Health Nursing category, however, received ten grants in all, on average four times as many grants as any other category, or 1/3 of all the grants awarded to the Philippine Islands. The second highest category, Public Health Administration, received only four grants, or about 1/10 of all grants awarded. [10]

My dissertation, "From 'Civilization' to Citizenship: Private American Reformers, Filipinos, and American Colonialism in the Philippines, 1898-1946," uses the RF story to ask: what role did American non-state actors play in American colonialism in the Philippines? These Americans

came to the Philippines in droves as early as 1898 and understood themselves as part of the U.S.'s 'civilizing' mission on the islands. These groups -- such as Methodist, United Brethren in Christ, and Presbyterian missionaries, the YMCA, the YWCA, and the Boys Scouts -- worked directly with Filipinos to 'ready' them for self-government. My project, in telling the story of these organizations, those men and women who ran them, and the Filipinos with whom they worked, tries to understand American colonialism as not just a state action, but also as a wider cultural project that non-state Americans took up with gusto.

By deliberately turning to non-governmental sources to tell a story about U.S. Imperialism, my project will accomplish four major historiographic interventions. First, it will argue that, to understand American empire before World War II, we must include non-state actors in our story. Whereas post-WWII American historians have increasingly done so, and non-American historians have done so for the British, Spanish, and French empires, historians of American empire pre-WWII have yet to fully take this into consideration. I will argue that American power in the Philippines was, in part, derived from a wide-spread cultural project of 'benevolent civilization' which, over time, was increasingly run by a network of American non-governmental agents in cooperation with Filipinos.

Second, I will tell a story about American empire in the Philippines that spans the entirety of the colonial period. American governmental sources wane post-Filipinization (1913-1916) as many government officials left the islands.^[11] Because most historians have focused on American empire as a state-centered project, most scholarship relies heavily on these sources. As a result, many works on American colonialism in the Philippines end shortly after 1916 or devote more analysis to the early colonial period. With the sources I choose, including the Rockefeller Foundation archives, my work can tell a comprehensive story about American colonialism that spans from 1898-1946.

Third, I will place Filipinos firmly at the center of this story. Colonization is not just the story of the colonizer. Rather, empire is a complex negotiation between the colonizer and the colonized. Colonized peoples accepted, resisted, and worked within colonial systems to affect change. My dissertation will show how Filipinos did just that under the American imperial state. Elite and non-elite Filipinos appear throughout Rockefeller and other reformers' records as targets of 'civilization,' as resistant to American policies, and as shapers of those reformers' programs. These records come from not just Manila, but Northern Luzon, the Central Visayas, and Mindanao. Therefore, my project will tell a national story.

Fourth, my project will also place Filipina women firmly at the center of this story. American reformers, especially the Rockefeller Foundation, not only tried to reform the Filipino gender order to 'civilize' the nation; they also specifically targeted Filipina women. Whether in trying to change practices of motherhood, training Filipinas as nurses, or placing them in charge of major public health programs, American reformers sought out Filipina women for their projects. My research will share these Filipinas' stories as I track how they were not at the margins of the colonial project, but central to it.

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

ENDNOTES:

[1] Dr. Clark H. Yeager, Field Director, International Health Division, "An Outline of the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) Activities in the Philippine Islands." p. 1, Folder 12, Box 1, Series 242, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, New York (hereafter designated RAC).

[2] Bishop Brent to Jerome Greene, February 20, 1915, Folder 5, Box 1, Series 242, RG 1.1, RAC; Yeager, "An Outline of the Rockefeller Foundation Activities in the Philippine Islands." p. 2; Dr. Francis A. Coutant, "May 15, 1918, The Hospital Ship Busuanga." Folder 6, Box 1, Series 242, RG 1.1, RAC; F.W. Carpenter to Victor G. Heiser, June 7, 1920, Folder 6, Box 1, Series 242, RG 1.1, RAC.

[3] Brands, H.W. *Bound to Empire: The United States and the Philippines*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 121.

[4] Brands, p. 121.

[5] Brands, p. 122.

[6] Yeager, "An Outline of the Rockefeller Foundation Activities in the Philippine Islands." P. 2.

[7] Alice Fitzgerald, "Memorandum for Dr. Heiser, May 15, 1922." Folder 47, Box 5, Series 242C, RG 1.1, RAC; Alice Fitzgerald, "Report on the Hospital and Nursing Situation in San Fernando: Vigan, Laoag June 1, 1923." Folder 6, Box 5, Series 242C, RG 1.1, RAC.

[8] Fitzgerald, "Memorandum for Dr. Heiser, May 15, 1922."

[9] "Proposed Course for Training Public Health Nurses under the Department of Health, Manila." Folder 5, Series 242C, RG 1.1, RAC; "Memorandum by Dr. Heiser re: Conference with Miss Lillian A. Hudson re: The Proposed Public Health Nursing Program and Advanced Instruction for Supervisors and Administrators in the Philippines, July 13. 1932." Folder 55, Box 5, Series 242C, RG 5.

[10] Yeager, "An Outline of the Rockefeller Foundation Activities in the Philippine Islands." p. 9.

[11] Under Filipinization, the U.S. Government replaced nearly all American government officials with Filipinos.