

# A philippine hero

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... I. for my part, have done everything possible to avoid it, although at the cost of many rights uselessly sacrificed... My government can not remain indifferent in view of [the] violent and aggressive seizure of its territory by a nation which has arrogated to itself the title champion of oppressed nations. Thus... my government is disposed to open hostilities [if America attacks the Visayas]. Upon their heads be all the blood which may be shed. Emilio Aguinaldo Proclamation, Malolos, January 5, 1899

In Larry Henares' program, some of the panelists -staunch admirers of Aguinaldo- expressed the oft-repeated view that the general failed to achieve greatness in the eyes of Filipinos simply because he lived too long. He didn't die young, in the flower of youth, like Jacinto, or in some twilight of the gods manner, like Bonifacio. He wasn't martyred, like Rizal, and he didn't die, penurious and neglected, like Mabini. He simply lived on, and on, until he became something like an antiquated relict fit for gawking at, but not for reverence. Poor, unheralded man.

No one ever made it clear if anyone asked Aguinaldo if that's what he felt. I would think that Aguinaldo was exceedingly fortunate to have lived so long. He outlived many of his friends, but he also outlived all of his enemies. He was reviled during his lifetime -in some cases, because he involved himself in politics and thus made himself fair game- but he lived to see independence day moved to June 12. Isn't having lived long enough to be told of that change an exquisite achievement? And throughout his life, he had the loyalty and devotion of the those who belonged to the League of the Veterans of the Revolution.

The things held against him, the sordid Tejeros Convention -one professor of history has pointed out that there were more votes cast than there were actually people to cast them- which led to the eventual execution of Bonifacio, and the assassination of Gen. Antonio Luna which was a great blow to the military viability of the forces of the Republic, may forever bar him from reaching the same exalted place in the affections of the Filipino people. They will always haunt him. But they do not, I think, diminish his greatness at all.

The power struggle -a naked coup d', tat, some have called it- that led to Bonifacio's downfall does make for sickening reading. And his execution was a poor end for a patriot. But is such indignation over this, warranted? Do people get upset over this because, in reality, they are applying quasi-religious morality to a subject that should be divorced from it? Why should standards befitting religious sainthood be applied to secular heroism? Must you be " good" (in the way people like Fr. Nudas would define it) to be a hero? A hero for a secular country?

When Bonifacio's competence to hold the portfolio of the department of the Interior was questioned by Daniel Tirona, the Supremo, indignant, demanded a retraction. He failed to get it. Furious, he declared the proceedings null and void, and left. NCC Chairman Laurel recounted with pride on Henares' program how his grandfather, Sotero, head of the Batangas delegation at Tejeros, and a Bonifacio supporter, reacted to the uproar that followed. He called for lambanog. He drank, pulled out his gun, and put it on the table. He

demanded that, as they had all agreed to earlier, the decision of the majority be respected.

Otherwise, mag ubusan na tayo. The majority sided with Aguinaldo.

Bonifacio (or, depending on how you see it, Aguinaldo) had thrown down the gauntlet. As Sotero Laurel might have put it then, matira ang matibay.

Aguinaldo won, obviously. The thing is, in a revolutionary situation, extreme situations call for extreme measures. You can't dilly-dally and sort things out and massage egos while the enemy tries to kill you all . Every revolution everywhere has been marred with competing factions, many of whom act out of less-than-noble motives. In the end, one group must prevail, one destiny achieved.

The Revolution, for good or ill, had its destiny tied to Aguinaldo. While the movement (as Mabini saw it) faltered as a result of the Supremo's liquidation, it made it through. It was suspended after biak-na-bato, resumed again, and gave birth to the proclamation made from a window of a house in Kawit on June 12. The proclamation of the Philippines as a free country. The Republic did not prosper. Was it Aguinaldo's fault? The fault of the Ilustrados? Did it fail because of competing views and interests within it, divisions that exist to this day in our country and in other countries with similar histories?

Left to ourselves, they had as good a chance of eventually working them out as any other people on earth. But they weren't left alone. They were subdued with krag rifles and American tactics. Laudably, the Centennial Commission has made it clear that it is the proclamation and not the

substance of independence that will be commemorated in 1998. A proclamation whose aspirations have endured. As have its symbols: our flag, our anthem. Aspirations we strove to fulfill in 1946, aspirations every generation tries to fulfill up to the present. Aguinaldo was responsible for that declaration, that flag, that anthem.

He gave the nation vessels to contain its soul. We should be able to forgive him for being a flawed man and a poor politician. Again and again, our pantheon of heroes has been besieged by angry mobs, intent on pulling down -or raising up high above the others- the statues of great Filipinos. We, who should, as befits a supposedly democratic and liberal state, find nothing wrong or ignoble in having our heroes stand side-by-side, remain obsessed with establishing heroic hierarchies, as though the leaders we revere were petty princelings subject to Byzantine rules of precedence. Are we a people unworthy of heroes in the first place?