

Theodore Roosevelt: First Governor General of the Philippines?



Under Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt in 1897 – Naval Historical Center

In 1900, one of history's significant "might have beens" occurred that is worth noting. Theodore Roosevelt had returned from Cuba in 1898 as a national hero and had won the governorship of the State of New York, although by a narrow margin. As his very active two-year term came to an end, he had established his credentials as a "Progressive" Republican and, much to the consternation of the conservatives, had become even more popular and visible nationally. However, the Republicans in New York badly wanted to get rid of him and his reformist ways, and he was facing uncertain prospects for reelection. Friends and supporters were pressing upon him the idea of becoming a candidate for the Vice Presidency, following the sudden death of the highly respected Garrett Hobart, but Roosevelt was lukewarm to the idea and viewed it as tantamount to a political exile. Roosevelt really wanted to be President, but McKinley would most certainly once again be the flag bearer and there was no constitutional requirement at that time limiting the number of terms of office.

Only 41 years old, Roosevelt was perceived as a political force with which to be reckoned but somewhat of a loose cannon. He had a long interest in the Philippines dating back to his short stint as Under Secretary of the Navy in 1897-1898, and had been an ardent supporter of its annexation (although by 1905 he had reversed his position). In late 1899, he met with Jacob Schurman, just back from the islands who was preparing the final report and recommendations of the 1st Philippine Commission. Among the Commission's

recommendations would be the establishment of a civil government for all of the islands headed by an all-powerful Governor General, patterned after the British Viceroy concept. This excited Roosevelt who not only was attracted to the job but saw it as an enormous opportunity to turn around his ailing political fortunes. It would definitely be a major challenge, highly visible to the general public, exceptionally powerful, and politically independent of local politics. This could be both a dream job and a natural stepping stone to the Presidency in 1904 or 1908 for one out of step and viewed suspiciously by his party's conservative base.

Following his meeting with Schurman in December of 1899, Roosevelt wrote to a number of close friends, that he would very much like to be the first Civil Governor of the Philippines, although expressing doubt it would be offered to him unless pressure were applied to McKinley. He wrote to his friend and close political ally, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge twice about the feasibility of gaining such an appointment and stated his aversion to the Vice Presidency, as it could cut him off from consideration for "the thing I should really like to do", be Civil Governor of the Philippines. Prompted by Roosevelt, Lodge approached McKinley about the position. Lodge reported back that McKinley's answer was to the effect that in his judgment now was not the time to establish a civil government in the Philippines, at least not until the war was clearly resolved. The President offered encouragement, although not his endorsement, for Roosevelt to pursue the Vice Presidency. But McKinley was hiding something from Lodge and Roosevelt. He had already sent for William H. Taft, a semi-obscure but politically well-connected judge from Ohio, to offer him a position with and even the "Presidency" of a new, 2nd Philippine Commission. Ostensibly to be a continuance of the investigative work of the 1st Philippine Commission, in reality it was to be fashioned as a civil government in waiting.

Even though put off, Roosevelt's interest in the Governorship did not wane for what he repeatedly described as "a job really worth doing." But, even as he followed McKinley's recommendation and his candidacy for the Vice-President progressed, he expressed to Lodge that, if the time arrived when a Governor General would be appointed, he was prepared to resign the Vice-Presidency if offered the position.¹

It seems obvious in retrospect that McKinley wanted someone who would clearly be more compliant and controllable, and whom he thought would be without threatening political ambition—certainly not Roosevelt. It was not at all outside the realm of possibility that had T.R. been somehow made aware of what was going on, and given the kind of political pressure Roosevelt was certainly capable of mustering and McKinley's usual avoidance of confrontation, he could have derailed the Taft appointment and substituted himself. With the dynamic, combative Roosevelt in such a position, it is hard not to believe that Philippine, Moro, and U.S. history might well have been very different. The colorful and feisty Moros would likely either have found a simpatico friend in T.R. or goaded him to a fight to the finish. And U.S. history most certainly would not have been the same with a much more conservative and less colorful President succeeding McKinley. The center of Progressivism could have been the Philippines, not the United States. Only a novelist could do justice to the tantalizing speculation of what then might have been the result of Theodore Roosevelt as the first Governor General of the Philippines.

¹ Oscar M. Alfonso, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Philippines, 1897-1909*, (New York: Oriole Editions, 1974), 28-30.