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A History of Filipino Immigration to the U.S. And Current Trends

A Critical Analysis

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The Filipino community is one of the fastest growing minority communities in America today. Filipinos now number over 700,000 throughout the U.S.

The community grows daily; new immigrants, new births. The numbers of Filipinos seeking America as their new home is second only to Mexicans, as shown on the chart of the top five immigrating groups to America for the year 1976.

(See chart on page 2.)

Why a large Filipino community in the United States? Why do Filipinos leave the Philippines for the United States?

The Filipino community of today is fast becoming a community of recent immigrants. Tens of thousands of Filipinos have arrived in this country annually since 1965 when the U.S. liberalized its immigration policies. Between 1965-76, 279,301 Filipinos have immigrated to the U.S.

On the whole, the Filipino community is a blending of three waves of immigration spanning nearly 80 years. The first occurring at around the turn of the century to the mid-30's; the second after World War II to

the mid-60's; and finally, the third occurring from 1965 to the present day.

The Filipino community in America is the largest overseas Filipino community outside of the Philippines. Why is there such a large Filipino community in the United States?

For a clearer understanding of the story behind the existence of this large Filipino community in the U.S., we must turn back the pages of history to the turn of the century. It is during this time that the destinies of the Philippines and the U.S. became closely interwoven into a complex network of socio-economic relations which still exist today.

1899 marks the year when the U.S. launched its war of aggression upon the Filipino people to wrest away Philippine sovereignty, newly-won from their former Spanish masters. Known as the Philippine-American War, hundreds of thousands of Filipinos died as direct casualties or from the ravages of war. Looking back we can now refer to this as the U.S.' "First Vietnam." Superior American firepower triumphed over the outgunned Filipinos, and the Philippines

became a colony of the United States.

The U.S. in making the Philippines a colony wanted a nation and a people which would be subservient to the needs of the U.S. business-industrial sector. This called for the perpetuation in the Philippines of a backward agrarian economy that served as a source of raw materials for the U.S., and at the same time as a market for U.S. manufactured goods. The implications of this system for the common "tao" (common people) was to doom them to the life of toiling the land as peasants under the domination of landlord rule throughout the Philippines. Under U.S. domination, the Philippines has never developed as an industrialized nation but remained dependent on the U.S. The resulting backward Philippine economy cannot provide adequate jobs and opportunities for Filipinos.

It is this social and economic relation of U.S. dependency which threads itself through Philippine American relations. The common factor which "pushes" the waves of Filipino immigration to the U.S. is the lack of opportunities to earn a living in the Philippine economy itself.



The First Wave

1903-1934

The first Filipinos to come to this country were not from the peasantry. Most of them were students sent to the U.S. to be trained as future bureaucrats of the U.S. colonial government. They were called "pensionados" because the government paid for their education here in the U.S. These initial immigrants were the sons and daughters of the wealthy elite of the Philippine society.

However, the situation was not as opportunity-laden for most Filipinos during this period. The marked increase of large tracts of single-crop plantations in the countryside was causing the displacement and impoverishment of hundreds of thousands of Filipino peasants.

This stark reality was especially true in the Ilocos region, Central Luzon and parts of the Visayas. In these regions, there were numbers of cases involving land-grabbing and the development of large plantations growing tobacco and sugar for export to America. Debts, mortgaged lands and increased land rents all made life increasingly difficult. Many peasants were forced off their land and moved on to Manila and other big cities to search for a better livelihood. Once arriving in the city, they were unable to find viable jobs and became part of the lower strata of the working class scraping out a bare existence in squatter sections like Tondo.

Meanwhile, events on the other side of the globe in the U.S. were developing into a situation which would bring Filipinos in much closer contact with their "colonial masters." Towards the late 1890's and early 1900's, the agricultural industries of Hawaii and California were undergoing

dynamic changes. In Hawaii, the monopolization of the prime farming lands by a few growers opened the way for capitalist patterns of industrial operations (Castle and Cook; Theo Davies and Co.; Alexander and Baldwin; Spreckels, etc.). While in California, the development of modern methods of irrigation opened up the vast San Joaquin, Sacramento and Imperial Valley areas to large single crop farming.

Concentration of large land tracts in the hands of a few growers made possible large-scale operations. This was a dramatic change from the days of a single farmer tending his own crops. It required large armies of cheap labor to make this venture profitable.

The Chinese and Japanese first filled these labor needs. However, the harsh working conditions and extremely low wages caused the Japanese and Chinese workers to militantly struggle for better wages and working conditions. The growers responded viciously to this resistance by fanning racist, anti-oriental prejudices. Laws were passed which severely restricted any further Chinese and Japanese immigration to this country.

The development of these agri-business industries was given a big boost by the outbreak of World War I. The war created a great need for agricultural goods, causing massive expansion in production. Wartime demands and inflationary prices for agricultural products drove the growers to step-up production and to keep up with the expanding market. All this time, immigration was at a standstill. With their expanding markets, the growers became

frantic in their search for more sources of cheap labor.

The agri-business industry in the West, like the manufacturing industries in the Mid-west and East, have traditionally relied heavily on the sweat and toil of immigrant labor. Largely because of these workers, the U.S. emerged by 1900 as the most powerful industrial country in the world. However, the immigrant workers did not receive benefits corresponding to their real worth. Their experience was one of hardship and exploitation.

In Hawaii, the Hawaiian Sugar Planters Association (HSPA) needed a reliable cheap labor source to replace the militant Japanese. The HSPA looked to the Philippines to fill the need. From 1907 to 1926, the sugar planters imported upwards of 100,000 Filipinos to Hawaii. Since there were no legal restrictions on Filipino immigration at this time, the Hawaiian planters opened recruitment offices in Manila to facilitate the inflow of Filipino labor. Recruiters scoured the impoverished countryside giving special lectures with motion pictures, distributing leaflets, etc.—all painting an idyllic vision of "America" where money could be made quickly and a man could become prosperous if he worked hard enough. Supplemented by word of mouth tales from former laborers, the promotional campaign was so successful that the planters were able to discontinue the prepayment of transportation expenses in 1926 without affecting the flow of Filipino labor to Hawaii.

The Filipinos who came to this country after 1920 were not students from wealthy

