

The Forgotten Amerasians

By CHRISTOPHER M. LAPINIGMAY 27, 2013

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NEW HAVEN — THE Senate Judiciary Committee approved an [immigration reform bill](#) last week that would gradually make citizenship possible for as many as 11 million undocumented immigrants. The bill is widely described as sweeping in scope. In fact, it is not quite sweeping enough, as it leaves the plight of another group of would-be Americans unaddressed.

Take Pinky. In 1974, her father, Jimmy Edwards, was a 22-year-old sailor aboard a United States Navy ship visiting the Philippines, 9,000 miles away from his hometown, Kinston, N.C. He fell in love with a Filipina named Merlie Daet, who gave birth to their daughter, Pinky. Mr. Edwards had hoped to marry Merlie, but as a sailor, he could not marry a foreigner without his captain's consent. The captain refused. Despite his best efforts over the years, Mr. Edwards was unable to find Pinky (or Merlie).

Until 2005, that is. USA Bound, a now defunct nonprofit organization that reconnected Filipino children with their American fathers, told Mr. Edwards that it had found Pinky. He flew to the Philippines, only to find her living in poverty in a cinder-block hut in the mountains with her husband and five children. Determined to give her a better life, he sought United States citizenship for her.

To his surprise, it was too late. Although by birthright, children born out of wedlock to an American father and a foreign mother are entitled to United States citizenship, they must file paternity certifications no later than their 18th birthday to get it. But since the military bases in the Philippines have been closed for over 20 years, virtually all Filipino "Amerasians" — a term coined by the author and activist Pearl S. Buck to describe children of American servicemen and Asian mothers — have passed that age.

Stories like Pinky's are legion. Amerasians in the Philippines substantially outnumber those living in neighboring countries, with recent estimates as high as 250,000.

The large numbers are explained by our military's 94 years in the Philippines, from the Spanish-American War in 1898 to its withdrawal in 1992. During the cold war, the United States leased military installations throughout the archipelago, including Clark Air Base and Subic Bay Naval Base, the United States' two largest overseas bases at the time.

Around them emerged bars and clubs, where servicemen were encouraged to find “rest and relaxation.” While some Amerasians were conceived through prostitution, many were born out of committed relationships. Soldiers’ limited tours of duty — and, later, the abrupt closures of the bases — tore couples apart.

The closures dealt a serious economic blow to many Amerasians. A 1999 study commissioned by the nongovernmental organization Pearl S. Buck International showed that Amerasians had disproportionately suffered from underemployment, poverty, domestic violence and sexual abuse.

They also face relentless discrimination. In a Catholic society that stigmatizes illegitimate children, Filipinos deploy an arsenal of slurs against Amerasians: *iniwan ng barko* (“left by the ship”) and *babay sa daddy* (“goodbye to Daddy”) among them. Black Amerasians are often called “charcoal,” or worse.

For these reasons, most Filipino Amerasians dream of coming here for a better life. But despite their American blood, it is very difficult if not impossible for them to immigrate legally and eventually become naturalized citizens.

Other Amerasians, however, have no such problem. After the Vietnam War, Congress passed the Amerasian Act of 1982, which allowed Amerasian children in Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and South Korea to immigrate.

Some members of Congress have tried to rectify the omission of the Philippines. On several occasions between 1997 and 2001, Senator Daniel K. Inouye of Hawaii, who died last year, introduced a bill to extend the Amerasian Act to the Philippines and Japan. But the Senate Judiciary Committee rejected it, claiming that Filipino Amerasians were not victims of discrimination, that they were conceived from illegal prostitution, and that, unlike Amerasians in South Korea and Vietnam, they were born during peacetime. But none of these are conscionable grounds for selectively preventing Filipino Amerasians from coming to this country.

At a time when the issue of immigration reform is before the nation, Amerasians need new leaders in Congress to speak on their behalf. What’s more, the military has recently announced that it will restore a significant presence in the Philippines; last year, over 70 ships stopped at Subic Bay, and over 100 planes stop at Clark Air Base each month. The United States, then, has an opportunity for redemption — to make sure Filipino Amerasians are not left behind by the ship again.

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