



Random thoughts on
Life & Business in Manila

*Rose, Rose I love you, with an aching heart
What is your future? Now we have to part
Standing on the jetty as the steamer moves away
Flower of Malaya, I cannot stay*

Olongapo City, located about 80 kilometers northwest of Manila in Zambales Province, is a study in shabby deterioration, faded dreams, and lost glory. Its fate has, for the last century, been inextricably linked with that of Subic Bay, initially in its incarnation as Uncle Sam's citadel of defense for Southeast Asia and now in the form of Subic Bay Freeport.

Olongapo has never recovered economically from the loss of the Americans. Over 40,000 Filipinos worked on the sprawling base, and 80,000 more held jobs in the stores, restaurants, and honky tonks that served the many needs of the Yankees. The economic loss was huge and the grandiose dreams of transforming Subic into a hub of dynamic development have been, to put it charitably, only partly realized.

But that's not to say that the Americans left nothing behind.

One of the side streets in Olongapo City, just outside the Freeport, is called the Jungle. Take a walk there and you'll see children playing, and perhaps singing, as you do in cities throughout the Philippines. But something is slightly out of the ordinary, and it may take a moment to figure out what it is. The difference is that the kids are a little darker than the norm and are dressed in gangsta style baggy pants and hugely oversized shirts. And they're not singing Filipino pop songs while they play, they're rapping away like homies from Chicago or South Central Los Angeles.

Like other US bases throughout Asia, the red light district in Olongapo was characterized by de facto segregation. One of those areas, off Rizal Avenue, was the red light district for the Brothers (African Americans), and the street kids who play there now are mostly black Amerasians. Over towards Magsaysay Avenue, though, the girlie bars catered exclusively to white sailors and marines. The street kids there are white Amerasians, fairer than most Filipinos.

Regardless of the specific ethnic mix, however, these kids have it hard. They are ridiculed by their peers as "souvenir babies" or "half-baked Americans," and are subjected to merciless teasing (one favorite epithet is babay na sa, meaning "bye-bye to daddy"). Estimates vary, but there are well over 50,000 such children on the streets of Olangapo, Angeles, and other former outposts of the Americans. Virtually none of them knew their fathers, and most never will.

*All my life I shall remember
Oriental music and you in my arms
Perfumed flowers in your tresses
Lotus-scented breezes and swaying palms*

Beginning in the early years of the twentieth century, and extending to the early 1990s, the Americans transformed over 50,000 hectares of what was essentially tropical jungle into their primary strategic base for naval activities in the South Pacific and Indian Oceans. Serving the Seventh Fleet, the Subic Bay megaplex included medical centers, naval ship repair yards, a naval air station, and naval magazines. Together with Clark Air Base in nearby Pampanga, the air-sea base complex was a major point of departure for combat missions during the Vietnam War.

For over three decades after the end of World War II, the majority of the Filipino people enthusiastically supported the American presence. But that began to change during the 1980s when the American government continued to support Marcos even as the extent of his corruption became apparent. Don't forget that it was an American whirlybird that rescued the Marcos family from Malacañang and that the deposed dictator settled into peaceful retirement in the state of Hawaii.

As the new constitution was drafted in 1986, a small group of activists managed to insert a clause specifying that foreign military forces could only be present in the Philippines if ratified by a two-thirds vote in the Senate. When the bases treaty came up for renewal in 1991, the fragmented political conditions of the time precluded obtaining the required two-thirds vote.

At the same time, the global situation was changing rapidly. The Cold War was winding to a close, the Berlin Wall had tumbled, Germany was reunified, and the Soviet Union was disintegrating. The Americans still had a solid military presence in Japan and Korea. The United States was running a huge deficit and looking for ways to cut spending. Suddenly, the unthinkable occurred - the Americans began to see Subic as expendable. Thus, the American negotiators took a hard line, probably assuming that the "little brown brothers" would cave in to their demands. The eruption of Mount Pinatubo in June, 1991, which blanketed Subic with ashes, made it all the easier for the Americans to walk away from it all.

Let's be a little more concrete about the impact of the American footprint in this part of the world. Whenever you send hundreds of thousands of healthy young men abroad, they will get local girls pregnant. From the first time the Yanks set up shop in Asia, red light districts have been part of the scenery. The GI's had money to spend, they were lonely, they wanted to get laid, and the locals were almost uniformly in need of income. The host country daughters migrated to the areas around the bases, in most cases earning more than they could have elsewhere and supporting their families back home in the provinces.

It is estimated that over two million Amerasians have been born since the first American troops landed in Asia during the Spanish-American War (1898). There are Amerasians all around the region, including Japan, Okinawa, Thailand, Korea, and most prominently in Vietnam and the Philippines. There are Amerasians from World War II, the Korean Conflict, and Vietnam.

When I first married my wife, we had a request from her elderly aunt on behalf of her middle-aged son, confined to a wheelchair with cerebral palsy, The father, an American soldier from Indiana fighting in World War II, had stayed in touch for a short while - but not for long. All that remained for the mother and son were a couple of tattered love letters and a faded photograph.

When my wife's family discovered that I myself was from the Hoosier state, they were excited and thought that surely I could help them locate the long-lost father. I made a few phone calls on their behalf and had someone check some court house records, and contact was eventually made. The results, however, were unsuccessful. Like most returning American soldiers, he had blended back into his home culture, married a local girl, and raised a family. Nobody wanted to be reminded of something that happened so long ago and far away.

*Rose, Rose I leave you, my ship is in the bay
Kiss me farewell now, there's nothin' to say
East is East and West is West, our worlds are far apart
I must leave you now but I leave my heart*

The problems of the Amerasian children are magnified by the poverty of their families and lack of government or donor assistance. None of the revenues from the Subic Freeport are set aside for the health care, education, training, or self-reliance of women who "serviced" US troops. USAID has provided some rather miserly assistance, coursing it through a few committed NGOs. And it's almost certain that such US funds will be cut under the less-than-progressive George Dubya Bush administration.

In 1993, the Preda Foundation, on behalf of the children and the emerging women's rights movement in the Philippines, filed a class action suit against the American government in the states. Predictably, the judge threw it out, saying that the mothers of the children were hookers and that prostitution is an illegal activity. They tossed the issue back to the American Congress, which eventually allocated a measly sum (\$650,000), which was doled out through the Pearl Buck Foundation.

Actually, despite that court decision, by no means all Amerasians are the children of bar girls or prostitutes. Many of the mothers were simply secretaries, shopkeepers, or housekeepers who served the needs of the military machine. They met young, lonely American men who were, relatively speaking, wealthy beyond imagination. Many fell in love and lived with their men, keeping house for them and catering to their sexual desires on demand. They dreamed of marrying them and returning with them to the states. Most, like the *Flower of Malaya*, were left behind to yearn for the past and wonder what might have been.

The leftover human consequences are tragic. Caught between two cultures, neither of which accepts, recognizes, or validates them, the children face the bleakest of prospects. Most live in excruciating poverty and are subjected to barrages of prejudice, discrimination, and hatred. Physical and sexual abuse are rampant, and many end up in the now-flourishing sex trade (see [Eva from Cebu](#)). The psychological devastation includes depression, terrible self-esteem, post-traumatic stress syndrome, drug abuse, and suicide.

Although there are occasional references to Amerasians in popular culture (*Madame Butterfly*, *Miss Saigon*, Oliver Stone's *Heaven and Earth*), this remains a largely unacknowledged problem. Given the many human tragedies around the globe, the issue is not exactly at the center of global attention. Indeed, it's probably something Uncle Sam would just as soon sweep under the rug. After

all, we now live in the global age and why dwell on mistakes of the past?

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To learn more about the situation faced by Amerasian children, visit the Preda Foundation (www.preda.org/index.html). A few committed individuals like Robert Ballenger and his wife Lani (www.filipinawives.com/amerasian.html) try to reunite Amerasians with their fathers and (in rare cases) help Americans find the children they left behind. I'm sure they would greatly appreciate any charitable contributions for their work.

Credit: Lyrics are from a Frankie Laine Columbia recording, 1951, written by Wilfrid Thomas, arranged by Chris Langdon

Ref.: <http://www.apmforum.com/columns/orientseas27.htm>