

# 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" 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 quite 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 pressed upon him the idea of becoming a candidate for the Vice Presidency, following the sudden death of its highly-respected incumbent, Garrett Hobart. But Roosevelt was lukewarm to the idea, viewing it as tantamount to political exile. The popular incumbent, McKinley, would most certainly once again be the flag bearer. And he could even later go on to a third term... there being 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 something 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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, especially 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, according to McKinley, in his judgment now was not the right time to establish a civil government in the Philippines, at least not until the war was clearly resolved. In addition, the President offered encouragement, although not an endorsement, for Roosevelt to pursue the Vice Presidency.

But McKinley was being deliberately devious. He had already offered just such a position to **William H. Taft**, a semi-obscure but politically well-connected judge from Ohio. The mechanism was to be the "President" of a new, **2nd Philippine Commission**, although ostensibly a continuance of the investigative work of the **1st Philippine Commission**, in reality, a civil government in waiting. Taft soon accepted.

Even then, Roosevelt's interest in the Governorship did not wane for what he repeatedly described as "a job really worth doing", and even as his candidacy for the Vice-President progressed, he told Lodge that, if the time arrived when an actual Governor General of the Philippines would be appointed, he would eagerly resign the Vice-Presidency if offered the position.<sup>1</sup>

It seems obvious in retrospect that McKinley wanted someone in the position clearly more compliant and controllable than Roosevelt. Even then, it seems not at all outside the realm of possibility that had T.R. gained a better insight into the maneuvering going on, and given the kind of political pressure Roosevelt was certainly capable of mustering, the Taft appointment could have been derailed and Roosevelt substituted.

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, first Governor General of the Philippines.”**

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

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