

Camilo Osias 1889–1976

RESIDENT COMMISSIONER 1929-1935 NACIONALISTA FROM THE PHILIPPINES

fter starting his career as an educational reformer in the Philippines, Camilo Osias moved into politics in the 1920s, first as a Philippine senator and then as a Resident Commissioner in Congress. His colleagues in the U.S. House of Representatives widely admired Osias for his eloquent oratory and his fervent support of immediate independence, quickly dubbing him "Mr. Philippine Freedom." His persistent advocacy paid off in 1932 with the passage of the Hare-Hawes-Cutting Act, which would have put the Philippines on the road to complete independence had not a struggle for power in Manila derailed it. Osias admitted that American rule came with certain benefits, "but ... precisely because we are pleased to recognize that America has been so successful in her work in the Philippines, we now come to you and say that the greatest manifestation of gratitude that we can show you is no longer to tie ourselves to the apron strings of a benign guardian but to ask that you set us free."2

Camilo Osias was born in Balaoan, a small town in the Philippines' La Union Province a few miles inland from the South China Sea, on March 23, 1889. His father, Manuel Osias, was a farmer and clerk for the local justice of the peace, and his mother, Gregoria Olaviano, was a homemaker. Osias was the second youngest of four surviving siblings, two boys and two girls. Four other siblings had died in infancy. The family led a simple, modest existence, supplementing Manuel's income by harvesting fruit from trees on their lot and repairing fishing nets. "Like most families in our community," Osias wrote years later, "our family in hardships tilled the soil to obtain additional sustenance, worked on watery fields or in the streams for additional food, and performed chores to gain some coins to satisfy our limited wants and needs. The neighborhood was a happy and quiet place in which to lead [a] simple and frugal life."3

As a young boy, Osias planned to become a priest, but when the Philippine Revolution erupted in 1896, he studied in San Fernando, where he quickly mastered Spanish. During the American military occupation of the Philippines, Osias became proficient in English while attending high school in Balaoan. In 1905 he was selected as a *pensionado* (a government-funded student) to study in the United States. He moved to Macomb, Illinois, to attend the Western Illinois State Teachers College, earning recognition as a stand-out public speaker and graduating in 1908. Two years later, he earned a bachelor of science degree in education from Columbia College of Columbia University in New York City. He also received a graduate degree from the Columbia University Teachers College with a specialty in school administration and supervision. S

After returning to the Philippines, he married Ildefonsa Cuaresma, a former public school teacher from Bacnotan, near his hometown, in 1914. The couple raised seven children, Camilo Jr., Salvador, Victor, Apolinario, Rebecca, Benjamin, and Rosita. Ildefonsa, who had headed the Philippine Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and campaigned widely for her husband in his early career, was herself a political power and formidable public speaker. "Tales of her exploits as a stump speaker during the electoral campaign when Mr. Osias was running for senator from the Second Senatorial District are, to this day, tea table bon mots," explained a *Washington Post* profile. After more than 20 years of marriage, Camilo divorced Ildefonsa and married Avelina Lorenzana in Reno, Nevada. That marriage produced no children.

When Osias first returned to the Philippines in 1910, he established himself as one of the islands' leading educators. For several years, he taught in La Union Province before moving to Manila, where he served as the academic supervisor of city schools. From 1915 to 1916,







he worked as the first Filipino superintendent of schools in Bataan and Mindoro. He next held several high-ranking jobs in the Philippine bureau of education, including as assistant director, where he endeavored to hire more Filipino teachers and administrators. In December 1921, Osias left government service to become the first president of the private National University in Manila. During his 13-year tenure, Osias imposed curriculum reforms and raised academic standards. He was also a prolific author and traveled widely in Japan and China, speaking about educational reform.

Filipino political leaders took notice of Osias early on. In 1919 Manuel L. Quezon, the islands' former Resident Commissioner who became president of the Philippine senate, invited Osias to join the first independence mission to the United States. While on Capitol Hill, Osias testified with the independence delegation before a joint hearing of the House Committee on Insular Affairs and the Senate Committee on the Philippines about how improved education has "contributed materially and greatly to the economic growth of the Philippines." Afterward, Ohio Senator Warren G. Harding pulled Quezon aside and told him, "If you have half a dozen men like your Osias, you are entitled to your independence."

Working with Quezon elevated Osias's profile and drew him further into politics. ¹² In 1922 he returned with another independence delegation that included Quezon and pro-nationalist leaders Emilio Aguinaldo and Sergio Osmeña. ¹³ While campaigning for Quezon's ticket a year later, Osias recalled, "People many a time privately told me that they would vote for me if I were the candidate." ¹⁴

They had that chance in 1925, when the local Partido Nacionalista (Nationalist Party) faction nominated Osias as its candidate for the Philippine senate. As a Nacionalista, Osias was committed to the principle of "independence, immediate, absolute, and complete." For Osias, the campaign against Alejandro de Guzman for the second senatorial district "was long and arduous." He recalled, "I was on the move night and day, attending conferences, meeting leaders and voters, delivering from five to 10 speeches daily at public rallies." On Election Day, Osias

swept his way to an overwhelming majority, claiming by his own estimate the largest margin of victory ever won by a Filipino political candidate.¹⁵

Osias served in both the seventh and eighth legislatures, where his interests centered on education initiatives and infrastructure projects. ¹⁶ He chaired the senate's committee on education and led a joint panel that reviewed the Philippine school system. ¹⁷

On February 7, 1929, when one of the Philippines' two Resident Commissioners, Isauro Gabaldon, resigned his seat in Washington, the territorial legislature elected Osias to succeed him.¹⁸ His election had wide support, but was not without detractors mostly from the Partido Democrata (Democratic Party) who did not agree with the pro-independence agenda of the Nacionalistas. Others questioned if he was sufficiently versed in business and economics to represent the islands on vital trade questions. After a failed attempt by the opposition to challenge the constitutionality of his appointment, Osias took his seat in the House at the opening of the 71st Congress (1929–1931) during a special session called by President Herbert Hoover in April 1929.¹⁹

In most aspects, his service deviated little from the pattern established by other Philippine Resident Commissioners over the last few decades. Per House Rules, he had no vote on the House Floor, nor did he serve on any committee. Without votes to trade, he acted more like an ambassador than a legislator, lobbying key committee members and executive department officials on Philippine interests pending before the federal government.

Osias brought his wife and five children as well as a small army of staff to Washington. But unlike some of his predecessors who had amassed independent fortunes, he found the transition—traveling halfway around the world and acquiring new housing—a burden on a government salary. He embarked with just \$1,000 to help establish his entourage in the federal capital. But on the long ocean voyage to Seattle, he won \$14,000 in a poker game, which helped to ease the burden. After arriving in the capital, the Osias family bought a house once owned by Wisconsin Senator Robert La Follette.²⁰



Once ensconced in Washington, Osias wasted no time designing a plan to secure complete independence for the Philippines, "the first and foremost mission expected of me by the Filipino people," he said. It was a "complex and many-sided" issue, he acknowledged, and it "meant intensive and extensive fighting and campaigning in and out of the American Congress."

The same day he took the oath of office, Osias, his colleague Pedro Guevara, and leaders of the Philippine legislature visited Secretary of State Henry L. Stimson, former governor general of the islands, to state their case for independence.²² Only months later Osias and Guevara visited President Herbert Hoover to apprise him of the warm welcome for the islands' new governor general, Dwight F. Davis.²³

Osias quickly identified three different attitudes in Congress when it came to Philippine issues. The first group was composed of Members who supported independence for any number of reasons. The second group opposed independence either on the grounds that Filipinos were ill-prepared for it or because they favored imperial rule. The final group was simply "uninformed, uninterested, or apathetic." ²⁴

Osias spent the bulk of his time trying to win Members over to his side and build support for Philippine issues. This included lobbying each category of Member—for, against, or ambivalent—as well as delivering speeches to clubs, civic groups, churches, universities, and business groups. Osias also recalled that the process involved endless hours of committee testimony: "Guevara and I, through various means befriended members of Committees that had the remotest relations to insular affairs."²⁵

Osias often camped out on the House Floor to follow debates, looking for opportunities to talk in support of independence, sometimes on subjects far afield from the Philippines. Once, when the House considered an appropriations bill for indigenous Indians in the territories of Alaska and Hawaii, Osias jumped to his feet and highlighted how Congress often categorized the Philippines differently than it did America's other territories.²⁶

Afterward, a Congressman found Osias at his seat. "That speech of yours is going to cost me money," he

ribbed the Resident Commissioner. "I just lost a bet for dinner, because I thought you cannot possibly bring in Philippine Independence in the course of your remarks on the Bill that had nothing to do with your country. And I'll be darned if you didn't." "Well, for listening," Osias replied, "I'll foot the bill."

With the onset of the Great Depression, Osias used the opportunity to suggest that immediate Philippine independence would reduce costs for the federal government. As the 71st Congress entered its second session and the economic crisis deepened, he became ever more strident on that issue. When competition for jobs led to violent conflict between Filipino and white workers on the West Coast, there was discussion about banning foreign laborers.

In late January 1930, Osias condemned the proposed immigration ban, pointing out that the Filipinos were still under U.S. rule. American shipping interests had recruited young Filipino men as a cheap source of labor by portraying America as a "land of opportunity and promise," he said, before criticizing Congress for faulting Filipinos who chose to come. "But so long as we are under that flag," he shouted, motioning to the Stars and Stripes hung behind the Speaker's rostrum, "we will continue to enjoy its most priceless heritage—citizenship. But for the sake of our independence we are willing to become a foreign country and take our place among the foreign nations."²⁸

Biding his time, Osias listened with "religious attention" as California Congressman Richard Welch explained his bill "to exclude certain citizens of the Philippine Islands from the United States." When Welch finished his statement, Osias obliterated it. The bill was "violative of the spirit of justice," "makeshift," and "unnecessary," he said. "What is necessary is to set us free," Osias thundered to loud applause from the galleries. "If we are to be treated as a foreign people for purposes of immigration, we must first be given the category of a free and independent nation."²⁹

Late in the 71st Congress, Osias went before both the House Rules Committee and the Senate Committee on Immigration to vigorously oppose a proposal to ban immigration from the Philippines. "What are we?" he





asked the somewhat hostile Senate panel. "I would like to say that the Congress of the United States can not well afford to let another generation of Filipinos go without a definite citizenship."³⁰

Much of the debate around citizenship and independence was inextricably linked to the unique economic arrangement between the United States and the Philippines. In mid-June 1929, in some of his earliest committee testimony, Osias argued against restrictive quotas and new taxes on coconut oil and sugar in what would become the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act. He prodded the United States to live up to the ideal of free trade and argued that, by hampering the Philippine economy, the United States was hurting the robust import business of its own producers. "What America does in the Philippines is the basis of interpretation of America's motives and principles by the peoples in the Pacific borders," he told the Senators. "It is therefore a business and a moral asset for America to see to it that nothing that she does or omits to do ... will result in shaking the faith and confidence or lessening the friendship of the peoples in the Orient."31

A month later, again before the Senate Finance Committee, Osias urged Congress to limit restrictions on Philippine trade. After lobbyists for U.S. cotton, dairy, and meat interests asked the committee to impose duties on competitive Philippine products, Osias railed against the suggestion, asking the committee for more equitable trade terms.³² Approved and signed into law in June 1930, the final Smoot–Hawley Tariff bill retained many of the existing trade provisions, as Osias had wished, but it also included a provision restricting the amount of foreign material in Filipino products.³³

By the time the 72nd Congress (1931–1933) convened in December 1931, the movement for independence had gathered supporters in Congress, and in early 1932, a bill named for Butler Hare of South Carolina, chairman of the House Insular Affairs Committee, began to move through the House. It permitted the Philippine legislature to immediately call a constitutional convention, provided for a plebiscite on the draft constitution, kept import and immigration quotas low, and implemented a full

tariff schedule on Philippine products after an eight-year transition period.³⁴ Osias believed the Hare bill was not perfect—certain provisions for a long-term U.S. military presence rankled him, for instance—but he got the sense that it was passable on Capitol Hill. He, along with senior Philippine legislators, appeared before the House Committee on Insular Affairs in early February 1932 to press for its passage.³⁵

Speaker John Nance Garner of Texas maneuvered the bill onto the floor by bringing it up under suspension of the rules, requiring a two-thirds vote after just 40 minutes of debate. This tactic prevented the powerful farm bloc from inserting amendments that would have implemented harsher tariffs and granted immediate independence.³⁶

At the end of the House debate on the Hare bill, Osias took to the floor and provided an oratorical flourish that punctuated the debate. Referencing the portraits of the Marquis de Lafayette and George Washington hanging astride opposite ends of the Speaker's rostrum, he beseeched colleagues to approve the measure. Watching from the public galleries was a large contingent of Filipinos, including Philippine house speaker Manuel Roxas and Philippine senate president Sergio Osmeña, both of whom supported the independence bill. "The thought uppermost in my mind and my fervent prayer in this hour of solemn decision is that the Members of this body may incarnate in themselves the spirit of Lafayette and Washington," Osias declared to an ovation, "and, by their wisdom and statesmanship, bring into being another starry banner that shall symbolize sovereignty in the Philippine republic that is to be and enable the Filipino people to consummate their own glorious destiny." With Osias watching, the House approved the Hare bill by a large majority, 306 to 47.37

A separate, but similar, measure had been introduced in the Senate in early 1932 by Harry B. Hawes of Missouri and Bronson M. Cutting of New Mexico. But in a presidential election year, with opponents pushing hard to kill the bill, the Senate did not pass its version until mid-December 1932. A conference committee swiftly settled the few differences between the Hare bill and the



Hawes–Cutting measure, changing the transition period before independence to 10 years.³⁸ On December 22, the Senate approved the conference report, passing the newly named Hare–Hawes–Cutting Act; the House followed six days later without even a quorum of its members present, in a division vote of 171 to 16. "In the light of colonial records this Philippine bill, on the whole, is just, fair, and reasonable," Osias judged.³⁹

On January 13, 1933, President Herbert Hoover vetoed the Hare–Hawes–Cutting bill, but the House quickly overrode him, 274 to 94. "A law granting us independence," Osias reminded the chamber, "would be a crowning glory to America's stewardship of the Philippine Islands." The Senate followed the House four days later, overriding the veto 66 to 26.41

Importantly, the final version required the Philippine legislature to approve the independence act. Insular politics immediately came into play as Manuel Quezon, concerned that Osmeña, who had helped negotiate the Hare–Hawes–Cutting Act, might challenge him for political supremacy on the islands, set out to thwart the independence bill. For much of 1933, the Partido Nacionalista fractured into pro and anti factions, and on October 7, 1933, Quezon presided over a lopsided Philippine senate vote, rejecting the independence bill 15 to 4.43

When Quezon began negotiating a nearly identical second independence bill, what would become the Tydings–McDuffie Act of 1934, Osias blasted him in the press for the maneuvering. In late December 1933, when Quezon led a new mission to Washington and received a chilly reception from the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration, the Resident Commissioner was not surprised. "It was a colossal blunder not to have accepted the bill, and then worked for a better bill later," Osias told the *New York Times*. "Acceptance would not have jeopardized our chances to obtain a modified measure."

As a result of their divergent positions on the first independence bill, Quezon pulled his support from Osias, imperiling his chances for re-election by the Philippine legislature as Resident Commissioner.⁴⁵ Osias did not take that act of political revenge quietly. He had thrown himself

unconditionally behind the Hare–Hawes–Cutting bill so fervently that he had damaged his political prospects on the islands. "This Osias is a bridge burner, all right," one observer noted. "No matter how precious and costly a certain bridge may be, if it is his bridge he burns it. That is all a part of the Osias urge. That is in his nature. That is in his blood."

Seeing the writing on the wall, Osias campaigned in the spring of 1934 for his old senatorial district seat. The controversy around the Hare–Hawes–Cutting Act dominated the election, pitting those for the bill against those who opposed it, though Osias maintained that the internecine warfare over the independence act had been "wasteful, divisive, and unnecessary." But he was on the losing end of the fight, noting that his former constituents "sacrificed" him: "My two terms as Commissioner away from the Philippines cooled the affection of the electorate toward their former Senator." Voters rejected him in the June 5 election, with Quezon actively campaigning against him. 48 The antis, under Quezon's leadership, swept to electoral victory.

In an unusual move, Osias's supporters in the U.S. Filipino community circulated a petition, eventually signed by more than 140 Members of Congress, requesting that the newly elected, decidedly "anti-Philippine" legislature re-elect Osias. ⁴⁹ But in late August 1934, Philippine legislators backed lawyer Francisco Delgado to succeed Osias, who refused to resign his position and stayed on until the conclusion of the official end of the term of the 73rd Congress (1933–1935) in early January 1935 (the House had actually adjourned *sine die* in mid-June 1934 ahead of the fall elections). ⁵⁰

After his House career, Osias continued in politics, winning election as one of the more than 200 delegates chosen to serve at the constitutional convention provided for under the terms of the Tydings–McDuffie bill. Shortly after the constitution was ratified, Osias was elected to the first national assembly, at that point a unicameral legislature in which he chaired the committee on public instruction. 51

During World War II, Osias served under the KALIBAPI, the Japanese-dominated, single-party occupation government.



The Japanese later imprisoned him for his suspected pro-Americanism. He was also briefly held after the war by U.S. occupation forces on suspicion of treason, but a court later cleared him of collaboration with Japanese occupiers. After the war, Osias served two more stints in the Philippine senate, the first from 1947 to 1953 as minority floor leader, majority floor leader, and president. And the second from 1961 to 1967. In 1953 he ran for the presidency of the Philippines, but lost the nomination. Osias died in Manila on May 20, 1976, at the age of 87.⁵²

FOR FURTHER READING

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Osias, Camilo. *The Story of a Long Career of Varied Tasks* (Quezon City, PI: Manlapaz Publishing Co., 1971).

NOTES

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- 2 Congressional Record, House, 71st Cong., 2nd sess. (29 January 1930): 2649–2650.
- 3 Osias, The Story of a Long Career of Varied Tasks: 17-18.
- 4 Eduardo Bananal, *Camilo Osias: Educator and Statesman* (Quezon City, PI: Manlapaz Publishing Co., 1974): 1–5.
- Bananal, Camilo Osias: 5–10; Congressional Directory, 73rd Cong.,
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 129. See also "Camilo Osias," Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present, http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=O000118.
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- 7 Bananal, *Camilo Osias*: 129; *Congressional Directory*, 73rd Cong., 1st sess.: 129.
- 8 Fernando A. Bernardo, *Silent Storms: Inspiring Lives of 101 Great Filipinos* (Pasig City, PI: Anvil Publishers, 2000): 63–65.
- 9 Zoilo M. Galang, ed., Leaders of the Philippines: Inspiring Biographies of Successful Men and Women of the Philippines (Manila, PI: National Publishing Company, 1932): 50; Bernardo, Silent Storms: 64; "Filipino Returns to United States as High Official," 12 April 1929, Christian Science Monitor: 3.
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- 16 For a listing of the Philippine senate in the 1920s, see the Philippine senate's historical tables at https://www.senate.gov.ph/senators/senlist.asp#sixth_leg (accessed 13 January 2016).
- 17 Osias, *The Story of a Long Career of Varied Tasks*: 172, 176; "Filipino Returns to United States as High Official."
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- 20 Osias, The Story of a Long Career of Varied Tasks: 181, 183-184.
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- 28 "Free Philippines Put Before Rights," 30 January 1930, *New York Times*: 4. See also *Congressional Record*, House, 71st Cong., 2nd sess. (29 January 1930): 2649–2650.
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- 32 Hearings before the Senate Committee on Finance, *Tariff Act of* 1929, 71st Cong., 1st sess. (16 July 1929): 262–263; "Protest by Filipino," 17 July 1929, *Wall Street Journal*: 2; "Three More Tariff Protests Received," 17 July 1929, *Washington Post*: 3.
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- 38 Friend, Between Two Empires: 96.
- 39 For the House debate, see *Congressional Record*, House, 72nd Cong. 2nd sess. (29 December 1932): 1075–1095, Osias quotation on p. 1095.
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