

# Looking Forward Toward Borneo

● *Into this second largest of the world's islands, three times as large as the Philippines, and in sight of them, an ethnic wedge could be driven that would crush this Commonwealth to bits.*

By Walter Robb

The United States is by law, and of course by propriety, charged with the responsibility of the foreign relations of the Commonwealth of the Philippines. She had better be about her business, in this matter, because the responsibility is not a mere *pro forma* trust. She alone can exercise it. She would not let the Commonwealth exercise it for itself, as she will not let the States. So she must bestir herself, for it is a dynamic responsibility whose situations are beginning to present themselves clamorously. When the Commonwealth act was passed in 1934, possibly this was not clearly foreseen; and possibly, though it should be, it is not seen clearly now.

Yet an attitude of indifference can not be maintained without grave danger of hurt to the Commonwealth. This would stultify the McKinley policy, of which the Commonwealth is the fruition, a policy that obligates Washington to the Commonwealth's welfare consistently and unremittingly. We repeat that Washington's responsibility, in state matters, to the Commonwealth, is not perfunctory. Because we regret that devices adequate to cope with the responsibility have not been arranged, we invite attention to this as something falling well within the definition of grave oversight.

We do not allude, of course, to routine matters. These may be looked to well enough, they probably are: if alien fishing boats are poaching, complaints are no doubt properly routed and given due attention; also, it is recent memory that Commonwealth citizens in China, affected by the campaigns, were succored and evacuated to Manila. These are not the little things we speak of, because we speak of large and important matters that rightly and insistently come under the portfolio of state.

Truth is that Washington's responsibility engages the future of the Commonwealth; it goes so far as the laying of new foundations, even though they be for a future independent republic superceding the Commonwealth.

This should entail devices specifically set apart for it. These provided, the post of the High Commissioner (who should be watch-dog least, and statesman most), would assume a new significance. We do not forget that Francis B. Sayre as an assistant state secretary looks after Commonwealth matters. Certainly too, we are not unaware of Commissioner McNutt's high interest in the Commonwealth as a statesman and because of his position. But this is not adequate to the new responsibility involved. It lacks an initiating force, and its liaison arrangements are not up to the real task in hand.

It seems to us that both on grounds of expense and of mutual interest, existing arrangements should be articulated with a secretariat set up in the Commonwealth,

that would support it. We assume that an American chosen by the Commissioner, with the pragmatic sanction of the Commonwealth, should be in charge at this office; or it might be the other way about, the Commonwealth choosing, the Commissioner okaying, a man qualified by the highest ability.

If not this, then something similar to it ought to be added at the Commissioner's office. The reason is, there is a deal of work on Commonwealth state matters to do here, in this part of the world, that can not be well done from Washington. Nor can it be done by the United States ministers and ambassadors, because it should all clear through the Commissioner: he would not have authority over such officials, even if their appropriations were liberal enough to cover the cost of the work, and umbrage would ensue—the plan would defeat itself, or worse. In contrast, something along the lines just suggested ought to be attainable, and workable when attained.

The reason for it is plain. Its duties would be to keep tab-men throughout the Far East, traveling, observing, and reporting at Manila jointly for the Commissioner's and the Commonwealth's information; so that the Commonwealth from time to time, as current circumstances might advise, could initiate through the Commissioner's informed intercession, matters to be carried through in the Commonwealth's behalf: given, naturally, approval at Washington, and given good luck. Naturally too, the state department at Washington would by these means be kept posted on the Far Eastern situation as it was affecting the Commonwealth's viewpoint, whether diplomatic steps were taken or not.

But let us be still more explicit.

If anyone reflects on it at all, he realizes that the Commonwealth can not have a political future entirely aloof from Malaysia as a whole; he realizes that freedom and self-government will either be snuffed out here, which might well be the objective of more than one influential power, or that it will bravely expand and eventually encompass all Malaysia, on the mainland and in the Indies, whether these vast territories separated fully, and violently or peacefully, from their motherlands or not. In other words, the least reflective person must realize that freedom in the Commonwealth necessarily involves eventual freedom for all Malays—the evolutionary, or possibly revolutionary, redemption of a race of 130,000,000 people.

This means the Commonwealth has enemies, and that means that diplomacy in their behalf must be alert. The enemies are not necessarily enemies of the United States. That is precisely what makes the problem peculiar, more unique in American diplomacy than the wholom Japanese



(and still earlier, Chinese) communities in California—one state out of what are now forty-eight!—and that is what so strongly advises the special secretariat at Manila, the logical base of operations against such enemies. What is transpiring in Malaysia now, and what is likely to transpire is of primary importance to this Commonwealth, therefore to Washington, who can not properly discharge her responsibilities to the Commonwealth in its state matters without intimate possession of this basic information.

But as things stand, we believe the information is not being provided—at least, from the viewpoint of the Commonwealth—and if it is provided, provision is haphazard and dilatory. The Straits Settlements, the Federated Malay States, Siam (where Japan drills a new army), Saigon—what are the trends there? What must the Malay give up, what may he reasonably expect to hold? And *what can be done about it all?* Not indeed by way of starting a war, God forbid!—but by way of insinuating new influence in the Malay's favor, possibly better recognition of his ability. In some of his ancient lands, he will surely succumb to immigration that fairly overwhelms and sweeps him away; elsewhere in his forefathers' fields he may survive, and flourish culturally. Whatever his chance, wherever he is, it is vitally important to the Commonwealth to know what it is and to have something, when something seems advisable, done about it.

Greatest concern of all is Borneo, and we have some ideas about practical procedure in the instance of this island. Borneo lies in sight of the southern portions of the Commonwealth. It is an island three times the size of the Commonwealth, with a population a fifth as large. Borneo is in fact the second largest island in the world, only New Guinea being larger, Australia reckoned a continent. But remark that thin population, possibly three million persons all told. Borneo is on the equator, and equally as fertile as the Philippines—that lucky portion of Malaysia that the Commonwealth embraces.

If anyone wishes to know a great deal more about Malaysia today, Borneo included, good references are the book *In Borneo Jungles*, and Paul Scheffer's article, *The No Man's Land of Asia*, in *Asia* for February, containing a number of references to the Commonwealth that are well worth looking up. (We gained a high opinion of this Berlin newspaper man when he was in Manila last year, and during his visit had almost daily conversations with him. We were then impressed, as we had long been, with the potential importance of Malaysia in the scheme of things to come; naturally Scheffer's able discussion in *Asia* gratifies us).

We believe it will be generally admitted that Borneo, large as it is, will soon begin filling up by means of labor immigration. In fact, this process is underway now; we hear of Japanese concessions there, for growing Manila hemp in effort to procure a supply of this vital fiber outside the Commonwealth, and of course, with Japanese labor. Japanese also have oil concessions, in Dutch Borneo (three-fourths of the entire island), where the Dutch have their own oil works and are so perturbed about what might happen to them that they stand prepared to blast them to ruins on notice of twenty-four hours. If you know the peasant culture of the Commonwealth, and will compare it with Krohn's observations

in his book, just mentioned, you will not hesitate to say that Commonwealth peasants and Borneo Dyaks are brothers.

Krohn finds the Dutch administration of Borneo benevolent, while it is well known that similar government prevails in North Borneo under Rajah Brooke. These matters are not a Commonwealth concern.

What is a Commonwealth concern is how Borneo fills up. The character of this migration problem is European, more than it is American, but none the less real on that account. Observe Hitler today, claiming for the Reich all that is ethnically German. He is ready to brawl over the Polish corridor, to obliterate this barrier between the Reich and East Prussia; and East Prussia was an implantation. Similarly he reaches out for Danzig, a free city, once a proud jewel of the Hanscatic league; and he does so because a majority of Danzig's citizens are Germans—who migrated there. We don't blame him, we but recite. Yesterday he recovered the Rhur, the Saar, and tomorrow he will have recovered Austria—all because, and only because, there are Germans in all these places whose votes are Hitler's. Day after tomorrow, or sooner, he will bisect Czechoslovakia—there are enough Germans there to permit it.

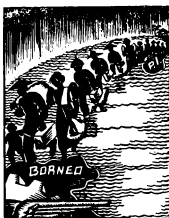
This recital has the sole aim of bringing home the fact that the ethnic character of immigrants is decisively important.

Has the Commonwealth emigrants to furnish Borneo? If so, it has a case in their behalf. Well, as a matter of fact, it has. It has plenty of Ilokanos, thirty thousand of whom must find resting places outside of their home provinces every year: the same fellows who formerly went to America, especially her west-coast states, and can no longer go there; the same fellows who solved Hawaii's labor problem by going there—and making good at every task in which they were employed. They are also the same fellows who do the Commonwealth's mining, and much of its timbering and sawmill work. In fact, as laborers, skilled and unskilled, they can not be honestly complained of. And that, we think, a point for the Commonwealth.

This much intercession by the United States, for the Commonwealth, ought to be tolerated by Holland and Great Britain: First, when labor is needed in Borneo, Malays should be recruited for it; if from other lands in Malaysia, well and good, but if not, then from the Commonwealth. Second, there should be some term set for concessions, probably the same term set by the Commonwealth, twenty-five years; because, in the inevitable evolution of Malaysia, concessions without terms might become annoying social anachronisms. That is to say, to the degree possible the basis of unlanded employment in Borneo should approach standards set in the Commonwealth. While such obligations of Holland and Britain are moral obligations only, yet when pointed out by Washington in behalf of the Commonwealth they might be obeyed.

They might be obeyed because Holland and Britain are friendly to America, and more so because they are fair demands. To implant Borneo with nonmalaysian stock is, in all probability, to deal this Commonwealth a mortal blow; and moreover, it has in it that shortsightedness that Sir Rutherford Alcock observed in early Britains at Shanghai—it more surely hastens the day

(Please turn to page 11)



perienced Japanese to plant it. They have 99-year leases. Ten thousand hectares have been planted, another 10,000 hectares are being planted. At 20 centavos to 30 centavos a day, native and Chinese labor is plentiful. Some disease has appeared, not very serious. Plants are said to grow 50% larger in thickness and height than in Davao, but the strippers are as yet little experienced and for this reason the fiber is not up to Davao's in quality.

Rumor is that a British syndicate has leased 100,000 hectares in North Borneo for Manila hemp. It would probably be imprudent to seed such a tract, larger than all Davao's together. Enterprising Japanese in Davao are reported as making progress with a modified stripping machine that does not require twisting the tuxies round a spindle for cleaning. This would make shorter fiber more merchantable, since use of the spindle by the present method tangles fiber ends into waste that must be cut off and sold as tow. An improved machine would extend the useful period of Davao plantations, since the older the plants the shorter the fiber—until after fifteen to eighteen years yields run below commercial values.

But it has been established that run-out fields in Davao can be restored to fertility for Manila hemp and successfully replanted. Yields are somewhat reduced, but the fiber is stronger and finer, hence of more merchantable grade. Borneo is probably a more genuine threat to Commonwealth hemp than Sumatra was. Let us hope not.

### Looking Forward . . .

(Continued from page 7)

when Borneo will not belong to Holland nor to Britain, and has in it nothing but immediate advantage.

But could Washington and the Commonwealth (that is to say, Washington in behalf of the Commonwealth) bring any real pressure to bear in case Holland and Britain were cold to the proposal outlined?

We think the pressure available is considerable. Holland and Britain enjoy many courtesies from the Commonwealth, the rule of *quid pro quo* may be applied—such states are familiar with it: Chamberlain invokes it just now, with Italy, has it in mind with Germany. Holland wishes to have a bank here, and gets it; she wishes to land commercial airplanes here, and will be granted the privilege; besides, she runs many ships to the Commonwealth, and hauls between the Commonwealth and the United States. These are all courtesies, and Britain's here, with two banks, are more extensive. If it came to a matter of swapping, the Commonwealth would have a good deal to talk about. But if the secretariat were established, that this paper proposes because the need of it is so obvious, and the case were worked up as it should be, the conversations should never descend to swapping. Holland and Britain should see at once that an ethnic wedge inimicable to the Commonwealth should not be driven into Borneo.

As soon as a democracy is launched anywhere, it has, of course, to look to its boundaries: on every hand it finds nought but opposition, quiescent or active according to circumstances, and it must shoulder through and make room for itself. Problems strikingly similar to the border problems confronting the Commonwealth of the Philippines now, confronted the United States when that federation was founded—with the expectation in:

Europe that it would be shortlived. Some men argued the unimportance of these problems, but wiser men felt their vital importance from the outset and exerted unceasing effort until in James K. Polk's administration they were all resolved. All this was difficult indeed. Circumstances affecting the Commonwealth should yield much more easily.

In America's case, resolution depended upon how the general elections turned; the south and the west blew hot on the questions at issue, the east blew decidedly cold—save for the patriotic apostasy of John Quincy Adams. With Washington handling the situation, the Commonwealth will not have to face this—consistent policy may be expected.

At any rate, the case of Borneo shows clearly, we think, that the machinery for America's successful handling of the state affairs of the Commonwealth is not all in place; that parts are lacking, at Manila, and by all means ought to be provided without delay. We think it also shows that diplomatic questions may be unique to the Commonwealth, that the mere routing of these questions through the state department at Washington is far from being enough for their solution. There must be an office devised, interested in these questions solely. Nor is at all remarkable that the foreign affairs of a people numbering seventeen million persons really require such an office, the Commonwealth's location being what it is. It would rather be remarkable if anything less would be found to serve in the circumstances.

The least that can be said is that Washington, in behalf of the Commonwealth's future—that future associated with the United States or not—must bestir herself with all possible cupidity and intelligence, and without delay.

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