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Teddy Roosevelt and the Taft-Katsura Agreement

By Dennis Halpin

If one drives out of Rapid City, South Dakota into the Black Hills, the spiritual home of the Native American Lakota Nation, on a starlit night, one will suddenly come upon a spectacular sight. Gazing up toward the peak of Mount Rushmore, one will behold the illuminated countenances of four of America's greatest presidents—George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt. American icon Teddy Roosevelt (T.R., the Rough Rider) however, is now being criticized in certain quarters in South Korea.

I was surprised, and a little dismayed, to read of a campaign in the country of one of America's closest allies to strip Roosevelt of his Nobel Peace Prize. I suppose, however, that I should not have been that taken aback. After all, I worked under the late House Committee Chairman Henry Hyde when he spearheaded efforts a few years ago to prevent leftist demonstrators from knocking down the statue of another American icon, General Douglas MacArthur, in the South Korean port city of Incheon. Incheon, of course, was the site of MacArthur's famous wartime landing that turned the tide of the war.

An August 14, 2013 report in the *Korea Times* quoted Dr. Kim Hak-joon as stating,

> Civic groups must stage campaigns boycotting Roosevelt's award and a protest letter must be sent to the related committee. The Nobel committee reasoned in its decision that the Treaty of Portsmouth brought peace to the Far East. But the tragedy of all Koreans lifted off from there.[1]

Americans, of course, respect freedom of speech and Dr. Kim can say whatever he wishes as a private individual regarding our twenty-sixth president. However, according to the *Korea Times,* Dr. Kim is the president of the state-run Northeast Asian History Foundation (NAHF). The listing of his official title raises the question: was he speaking in an official capacity during his recent press interview? If so, that is more problematic.

The historic issue in question goes back not just to the Treaty of Portsmouth, which ended the Russo-Japanese War, but to the Taft-Katsura Agreement, which is linked to that treaty. President Roosevelt became the first U.S. President (Woodrow Wilson, Jimmy Carter and Barack Obama being the others) to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1906 for his mediation efforts on this treaty. (Woodrow Wilson's prize is also controversial for some leftist nationalists in Korea due to the lack of inclusion of "self-determination" for Asian peoples in the Treaty of Versailles in 1919—specifically Koreans, Vietnamese, Taiwanese and Chinese living in the German concession on the Shandong peninsula, which was transferred to Japanese administration.)

Dr. Kim's comments appear to be linked to the Taft-Katsura Agreement—a reported informal, "gentlemen's agreement" reached between Roosevelt's Secretary of War and future President William Howard Taft and the Japanese Prime Minister, Count Katsura Taro. Their conversation took place during Taft's visit to Japan in the summer of 1905 just prior to the peace negotiations in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Roosevelt had presumably sent Taft, rather than the Secretary of State, to Tokyo as his trusted advisor and heir apparent. (Roosevelt and Taft would later have a famous falling out, splitting the Republican Party and paving the way for the election of Democrat Woodrow Wilson in the 1912 election.)

Utter the words "Taft-Katsura" to an average American and the response will undoubtedly be a blank stare. But I learned from my years of teaching in Korea that the words "Taft-Katsura" will almost invariably invoke a long discourse from Korean professors and students on

America's betrayal of Korea in exchange for Japanese recognition of U.S. interests in the Philippines. "Taft-Katsura" is engraved in many minds as a key element in the victimization of Korea at the beginning of the twentieth century.

A memorandum of the July 27, 1905 Taft-Katsura conversation was unearthed from government records by historian Tyler Dennett in 1924. The "agreement" was reportedly nothing more than an acceptance by the two sides of the English and Japanese-language versions of the notes of the conversation. Taft reportedly stated that the views expressed were his own and not made in his official capacity as a U.S. government official. The two sides restated their views on the current situation in the Asia-Pacific region, in light of the likely Japanese defeat of the Russian Empire. Katsura reportedly cited Korea as the chief reason that Japan and Russia had gone to war and indicated that Japanese colonization of Korea was necessary to prevent future conflicts in Northeast Asia. Taft is quoted as having stated that it was in Japan's best interests to have the Philippines governed by a strong and friendly nation like the United States to which Katsura reportedly concurred.

Whether this was a *quid pro quo* of Korea to Japan and the Philippines to the United States remains a matter of some discussion. What is clear is that the Roosevelt Administration had just encountered an unexpectedly strong insurrection (1899-1902) against American annexation of the Philippines by Filipino revolutionaries following the conclusion of the Spanish-American War. These Filipinos were not willing to substitute Spanish rule for rule by Washington. The Americans were keen to stabilize the situation. Taft, as the first U.S. civilian Governor-General of the Philippines (1901-04), understood this very well.

In dispatching Taft for discussions with the Japanese, Roosevelt was following the "realpolitik" strain of American foreign policy later to be perfected by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in his dealings with China and in the Middle East. Japan, already in control of Taiwan, had just sunk the Russian fleet in the waters between Korea and Japan and had taken Port Arthur. Its coming ascendancy on the Korean peninsula and in Manchuria appeared inevitable. Roosevelt, who reportedly later agreed that Taft had correctly stated the American position in Tokyo, appears to have been seeking the best deal for American interests in a changing situation.

A recurring joke among Congressional staffers is that, when the Americans and Chinese meet, the Americans inevitably want to talk about North Korea and the Chinese about Taiwan. Just recently, Beijing reportedly reiterated a willingness to break new ground in its negotiations on North Korea, both in discussions at Sunnylands with President Obama and in Beijing in talks with South Korean President Park. The Chinese are known to be among the world's shrewdest bargainers and generally concede nothing without receiving something in return.

There is some speculation, therefore, of a Taft-Katsura Agreement redux with the focus on Korea and Taiwan rather than on Korea and the Philippines. South Korea, however, would be an obvious winner in this hypothetical deal. In any offer where Beijing made concessions on the peaceful reunification of the peninsula, Pyongyang would be left out in the cold. However, if a Taft-Katsura Agreement redux materialized, with Beijing expressing new flexibility on North Korea in exchange for demanded concessions on Taiwan, how would Seoul respond? Would it stand on principle and protect a fellow Asian democracy (Taiwan) or instead would it jump at the chance to negotiate an auspicious deal on North Korea? Would realpolitik again trump ideals?

People in Seoul may not comprehend the degree of affection felt even now for Teddy Roosevelt by the American people. At Nationals baseball games in Washington, when the presidential race between innings takes place, many invariably cheer for the mustached, smiling Teddy character. A popular Capitol Hill eatery is named "Bull Feathers" after Teddy's penchant in a

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more genteel age for saying "bull feathers" instead of "bulls***." Teddy was the first war hero of the post-Civil War era, leading his Rough Riders up San Juan Hill in Cuba in the Spanish-American War. He came to power as the nation's youngest president with the assassination of President William McKinley, broke with the crony capitalist wing of the Republican party that had helped the robber barons cheat the common people in the gilded age, and introduced progressive reforms and trust-busting. Teddy made conservation and expansion of national parks a presidential priority, having been a sickly youth who had gone for health reasons to the Dakotas from New York City and gaining an appreciation of the natural beauty of the American West. And Americans loved this first modern president's use of the "bully pulpit" to communicate with them directly.

Perhaps it is best, in terms of the U.S.-ROK alliance, to remember July 27 as the date when the Korean War Armistice was signed, the sixtieth anniversary of which was just celebrated, rather than as the date when William Taft had his controversial conversation with Count Katsura in Tokyo. If July 27, 1905 raised questions concerning America's commitment to Korea, then July 27, 1953 should have resolved them once and for all. And, Bull Feathers! Let's not even consider taking Teddy's Nobel Prize away.

(Endnotes)

[1] Chung Min-uck, "Teddy should be stripped of Nobel Prize, Kim says," *The Korea Times*, August 14, 2013 http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2013/08/120_141066.html.

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