

U.S. veterans oppose return of Balangiga Bells to owners

Written by Administrator
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This Sept. 24, 1997 photo shows one of the Bells of Balangiga in Cheyenne, Wyo. The bells were a religious symbol when they were used to signal a 1901 ambush by Filipino guerrillas against American troops during the Spanish-American War. (AP photo/U.S. Air Force, Sgt. Alfonso Ramirez Jr.)

CHEYENNE, Wyo. — Military veterans are stirred up and speaking out against the possibility that the U.S. might return three church bells seized as spoils of war from the Philippines more than a century ago.

Such a simple gesture would go a long way toward demonstrating goodwill to an old and steadfast U.S. ally in the west Pacific, the Associated Press reported.

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The U.S. veterans' opinion on returning the bells?

Don't even think about it.

"We oppose the return of the bells, period," said John Stovall, director of national security and foreign relations for the national American Legion, according to AP.

Two of the three Bells of Balangiga are displayed at F.E. Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne.

They're part of a memorial to 46 U.S. troops killed by Filipino insurgents in 1901.

A third bell is with a U.S. Army regiment in South Korea.

Last week, the U.S. Defense Department sent U.S. Marines Brig. Gen. Richard Simcock to Wyoming to talk with veterans about the bells.

The visit was the strongest indication in years, if ever, that U.S. officials are giving serious consideration to returning the bells.

Recent discussion about repatriating the bells has prompted Wyoming's governor and congressional representatives to tell the Obama Administration to keep the bells where they are.

"I strongly oppose any efforts to deconstruct our war memorials that honor our fallen soldiers," Gov. Matt Mead wrote Clinton and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta on May 3.

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Last month, the American Legion passed a resolution referring to the bells and calling on Congress to pass laws to protect military monuments from foreign governments seeking their removal.

Filipinos revere the bells as symbols of their long struggle for independence.

The bells gave the signal for insurgents to attack American soldiers who were occupying Balangiga after the U.S. took possession of the Philippines following the Spanish-American War.

The issue could come up at the highest levels as Philippine President Benigno Aquino III visits the U.S. this week and meets with President Barack Obama and others.

Veterans worry the bells have become something of a bargaining chip in U.S.-Philippine relations, said Stovall with the American Legion.

“We think that one, that the bells represent a memorial to these fallen comrades in the Philippines. And two, were we to return the bells, it sets a dangerous precedent for other war memorials around the United States,” he said.

Messages left with the Philippines Embassy in Washington, D.C. weren't returned, but a senior White House official said the bells are an important and emotional issue in both countries.

“We will only have an announcement when we have good news, and we will only have good news when we have completed the process that is under way,” the official said last Thursday on condition of anonymity.

The modest brick memorial housing the bells at F.E. Warren — a base inaccessible to civilians without advance arrangements — is the only place where the U.S. troops killed at Balangiga have been memorialized as a group, veterans point out.

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“That is what represents their death,” said Todd White, an American Legion member from Worland in north-central Wyoming.

Some 400 machete-wielding rebels attacked the 75 or so U.S. troops in Balangiga.

Another company torched Balangiga the next day and took the bells as revenge.

The reoccupying soldiers took the bells home to Fort D.A. Russell, which eventually became F.E. Warren.

An old English cannon taken from Balangiga also is displayed at Trophy Park in F.E. Warren, a base that oversees dozens of nuclear missiles in underground silos scattered across the prairie.

The base doesn't have any runways but is home to a herd of relatively tame antelope.

Talk about returning the bells has been a perennial issue in U.S.-Philippine relations.

Whether the idea moves beyond mere talk this time remains to be seen: The White House official said he didn't know if the Bells of Balangiga would be discussed during Aquino's visit.

More than 10 years ago, around the centennial of the massacre, former Philippine President Fidel Ramos suggested to an AP reporter a Solomonic solution.

Send one bell from the base to the Philippines and keep the other one in Wyoming.

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Cut each bell in half and send half of each bell to the other country.

Weld the bells' halves together.

“And then we end up with two pairs that are almost identical to the original,” Ramos said.