The bloody rebellion in Mindanao may have elements of comic opera as well as drama. Yesterday, a newspaper front-paged a story, quoting an unnamed “ranking military official,” who said that the Muslims love action star Fernando Poe Jr. (FPJ) and would like to have the movie king head the panel of “peace negotiators.” Another action star’s name surfaced in the same article, which cited the idea that Abu Sayyaf rebels holding thirty-three civilians captive, including teachers and school children, wanted Robin Padilla—who converted to Islam when he was in jail in Muntinlupa—to lead government efforts to secure the release of the remaining kidnap victims. What’s this? A joke? Even if FPJ is a nice guy, and Robin may have “reformed,” what qualifies them to broker a peace deal? This is a rebellion we’re confronting, compounded with kidnapping, ransom, rape, murder, and arson, not a motion picture.

What ought to catch our attention is the latest development in which the fundamentalist Abu Sayyaf, who usually show no mercy, suddenly released eighteen of their hostages. The Abu Sayyaf did not do so out of the goodness of their hearts, nor for the 200 sacks of rice they are demanding as part of their “ransom” call—but clearly because relatives of the hostages counterkidnapped eleven relatives of Abu Sayyaf chieftain Khadaffy Janjalani. This is the cruel tit-for-tat that exists in strife-torn Mindanao, particularly in Basilan where the ragtag Abu Sayyaf are the most vehement of the insurgents. The bandits publicly blamed Basilan Police Chief Akmadul Pangambayan and Governor...
Wahad Akbar for abducting the Janjalani relatives in retaliation for the rebels’ seizure of fifty-one hostages. Both are denying this.

In the end, it’s more logical to conclude that kin of the original hostages took the Janjalani relatives in turn. The message delivered was: “If you kill our kinfolk, we’ll kill yours.” This is the language that warring Moro clans understand. It is a violent give-and-take which has been going on for generations.

We know Basilan, for instance, quite well on a personal basis. My sister and her late husband spent over twenty years of their lives planting and developing an 180-hectare plantation, against danger and all odds, in Galayan, Maluso (near where the Abu Sayyaf was “born”). The rubber and copra plantation was overrun years ago during the bitter fighting, then captured by Muslim rebels. To my widowed sister’s surprise, one day, out of the blue, she got a notice that the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) had divided up her hard-fought-for plantation among her alleged “Muslim tenants.” In all the years she and her husband had run the plantation, and her kids were born and grew to manhood there and in Zamboanga City, they had never had “Moro” employees and certainly no Muslim “tenants.”

But that’s Mindanao. The Moros claim that Christians “invaded” and grabbed “their land” generations ago. Now, they snarl, they are demanding “their land” back. Some bleeding hearts and do-gooders seem to swallow this romantic baloney, including many foreigners and observers. Very few mention the fact that the Yakans (the majority in Basilan since the old days), Taosugs and Samals in Zamboanga and the Sulu archipelago were mostly seafaring folk—okay, let’s call them pirates and raiders—and traders in more peaceful times, neither farmers, planters, nor agriculturists. How could they “own” the land? Even the Badjaos, who lived all their lives on water, were never landowners.

The Moro raiders were so feared during the Spanish colonial era that as far north as Vigan and my hometown in Ilocos Sur one could still find the ruins of old Spanish-built look-outs and towers designed to house sentries watching out for the sight of the colorful but dreaded sails of Moro vintas, those long-ranging sailing boats. When those vinta sails of the marauders were spotted, warning bonfires used to be lit, the local guardia hastily assembled to confront the Muslim warriors (coming for loot and slaves). The cry went up: “Hay Moros en la costa!” (There are Moros on the coast!) And, traditionally, during festivals,
Christian towns would stage a morality play called Moro-Moro, depicting Christian princes and warriors battling and vanquishing Islamic attackers. When we were children, we used to know how to sing and chant the Ilocano lines of the "comedia", as those plays were known, such as "Beware, because my sharp sword is coming!" The sword versus the kris is a longtime tradition.

How can "peace talks" ever succeed? The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) of Ustadz Hashim Salamat continues to demand that we must surrender our territory in Mindanao so they can establish an independent Islamic state there. How can a sovereign Republic surrender to rebels in order to buy a funny kind of "peace"? In turn, our government panel is demanding that the Muslim insurgents hand in their arms and surrender, which they are not disposed to do. Those so-called peace talks are leading nowhere, and can never lead anywhere.

The only way to win is for the government's armed forces and PNP to attack and overrun ALL the armed camps and so-called sanctuaries of the MILF and the rogue "Lost Commands," as it were, of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). It's ridiculous for us to allow rebel armies to "maintain" sacrosanct bases like Camp Abubakar, Camp Omar, and other fortresses, within our Mindanao provinces. From there they can run their own separate communities, train cadres, regroup, rest, receive foreign aid and weapons, and from which they can issue to raid the seize peaceful towns, ambush military patrols, attack AFP camps, and kidnap, ravish, pillage and burn. Only if we defeat the Moro rebels in combat, crush their "safe" sanctuaries and make life impossible for them, will they come willingly to a "peace table." When the government sues for peace, the rebels grow more arrogant by the day. They are creating the impression in the outside world that they are winning—and the government is "losing." When they beg for peace because they must, then, and only then, will peace talks have any meaning.

With their fight-talk-and-fight-again tactics, the Islamic mujahideen and their increasingly fundamentalist leadership are only jerking us around. And yet, so many government big shots who ought to know better keep on bleating that we should seek peace by "laying down our arms" and that "Filipinos must not be fighting Filipinos", and all that defeatist crap. During the years this journalist travelled all over Mindanao, I found Moros calling themselves "Filipinos" only when demanding projects, appointments, or aid. Most of the time,
however, we suckers are the “Filipinos,” while they call themselves Maranaws, Maguindanaos, Taosugs, Samals, Yakans, and other tribal appellations, never “Filipinos.” And they’re demanding, as well, that they be governed by Shariah Law as dictated by their Islamic tradition and the Koran, not the laws of the Philippine Republic. I can understand Muslims, in countries where they are among the vast majority, kicking their tiny Christian minorities around. But in this at least nominally Catholic country, where 85 percent profess Christianity, we’re still the ones being kicked around. When I express amazement over this, some Muslims ferociously call me “bigoted.”

But look at Kosovo. The Americans and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces crushed the “Christian” Serb troops, who were admittedly cruel and indulged in barbaric massacres, in order to save the pitiful, bullied Muslim Kosovars (ethnic Albanians). Now, it’s the returned refugees and Muslim Kosovars—and their Kosovo Liberation Army guerrillas—who are oppressing and murdering the tiny, remaining Serbian minority, conducting “raids” into next-door “Serbian” Yugoslavia, and taking potshots at the K-FOR (NATO) peacekeeping troops, who are growing, daily, more harassed and frustrated.

There is no hostility more deadly and everlasting than that based on religion. Centuries ago, Christian crusaders smashed into the Middle East, killing Muslims and Saracens with the war cry, Deus vult! (God wills it). The Spanish Inquisition, launched against accused heretics, remains a symbol of merciless religious persecution. (It was partly designed, of course, to enable Churchmen to seize the wealth, property, and assets of Jews and other “heretics”). In these fundamentalist times, on the other hand, it is a wave of Islamic fanaticism that is threatening the world—even Muslim-ruled countries. How can you argue with men and women who are brought up to destroy you because, as they cry, Allah is great and it is his (God’s) command that infidels be killed? Assassins are no less assassins, if they are paid in the coin of ascent to paradise. It’s terrifying.

It’s also sad. With millions of Russians having gone to the polls yesterday, across a land so vast it encompasses eleven time zones, it’s almost a foregone conclusion that acting Pres. Vladimir Putin will be resoundingly elected “President” in his own right, defeating his eleven rivals. What was the previously unknown ex-KGB officer Putin’s biggest achievement? That he crushed the Muslim Chechens and Russia’s remorseless armies continue to grind them into the snow and
into the dust. The first “war” against Chechnya was botched by Putin’s predecessor and patron, former Pres. Boris Yeltsin, who launched his assault on Grozny on December 11, 1994. This led to Russia’s abject defeat in August 1996—and the “victorious” Chechens’ commanding general, Aslan Maskhadov was elected “president” of Chechnya in 1997. Maskhadov is now a fugitive. Putin, in the eyes of 150 million Russians, has avenged that defeat and “restored” Russian pride.

The Chechens, it must be said, have only themselves to blame for their current plight in which hundreds of thousands have been rendered homeless refugees, scores of thousands are dead, and Grozny, their capital, reduced to rubble—a howling wilderness. Flushed with Islamic fervor and hubris over their previous triumph, Chechen guerrillas and saboteurs began attacking Russians in next-door Dagestan, then blowing up buildings in the heart of Moscow, leaving hundreds of civilians dead. They forgot that the Russians, smarting from their earlier humiliation, suffused with newly restored “Orthodox Christian” religious fervor (a surprising U-turn from seven decades of Communist atheism), can be as merciless and tough when provoked. Putin, who might otherwise have been dismissed as a nondescript type (he had never racked up any brilliant achievements, even in the KGB), cannily exploited these traits and resentments. His campaign platform was based on nationalism of a virtually chauvinistic streak and a resurgence of Russian self-respect. His trajectory, which may include the “reunion” of the Ukraine with the Russian Federation, only narrowly falls short of a restoration of Soviet power. For this reason, he has by now probably elbowed aside (unless there’s a runoff election) his only rival, the Communist Party’s Gennady Zyugannov.

March 27, 2000

Now that Vladimir Putin—okay, a former KGB operator—has been formally elected President of Russia by a vote of almost 53 percent, trouncing his nearest rival, the Communist Party’s Gennady Zyuganov, the world is cluck-clucking hypocritically that the 102 million Russians who voted didn’t get themselves a democratic or human-rights oriented chief executive.
Of course, they didn't. What does the world expect? From centuries of feudal and czarist authoritarianism, 74 years of ruthless Soviet Communism, and the end of a Cold War in 1989 which had formally begun in 1949 (on April 4 specifically, when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was formed as an anti-Soviet alliance) and a decade of bumbling—both honest stumbles and dishonest pranks—by Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, neither of them “fully” democratic or even reform-educated, could 150 million impoverished and confused Russians jump from strongman rule to a government of the people, for the people, and by the people? Abe Lincoln, if transplanted to Moscow, would have gone nuts.

The Asian Wall Street Journal yesterday asked the question in its editorial, “The Power of Putin”, whether it was a good thing for Russia or bad that Putin was elected. “We know his past as a KGB man and his high regard for the secret services, whose power he has enhanced. Yet the caricature of a Chekist thug doesn’t quite fit either.” In his brief stint as acting president, the newspaper said, “there is much to fuel both deep worries and high hopes. He beat a path to the Kremlin by demolishing Chechnya. A free press was just one of the conveniences that got trampled along the way.” The newspapers and television comments all over the globe in the next few days will be full of lectures addressed to Putin on how he must reform Russia.

“Today’s appearance of prosperity,” the Journal intones, “may be a Potemkin moment—Russia’s capital markets are nonexistent; its banking system in shambles. Devaluation made imports more expensive, leading to the import substitution that has given Russian manufacturers a false sense of competitiveness. There is little evidence that Russian companies have used new-found liquidity to make capital investments and improve efficiency.”

The Financial Times of London, another internationally circulated daily, warns that, while “Western politicians are keen to embrace the powerful leader,” they should

bide their time until they can see how he intends to use the power of the presidency. It was Boris Yeltsin and his family, together with the oligarch, Boris Berezovsky, who selected Mr. Putin as the man most likely to protect their interests. His progress from obscurity to prime minister,
acting president and president has been smooth. What is not clear, despite his pledges to root out corruption, is whether Mr. Putin will be able to distance himself from the forces that have made him president. Mr. Berezovsky brags that the oligarchs will increase their control.

The Economist weekly (25 to 31 March 2000 issue) adds its caveats in an article entitled “A Russian Coronation.” The newsweekly—in a piece obviously written before the polls—mourned that Putin “has produced no detailed manifesto or campaign material, and declines to debate with other candidates. His most serious opponents were crushed in the parliamentary elections three months ago.”

The only clue I may hesitantly provide to how Putin will turn out as Russian president is the rule of thumb I developed during the years in which I was one of the Kremlin watchers and, off and on, covered the Soviet Union and Russia itself. Whenever I was unsure of coming events there, or how Russians would react, I realized that for some weird reason I won’t try to analyze in this article they would usually act like us Filipinos. Is Russia still feudal? Guess. You’ll be right in your conclusion. Is Russia riddled with mafiosi, powerful vested business interests, and “cronies”? You bet. Will Putin become an Erap or a Marcos? That is the real question. Those two, for all the snide comparisons, are not the same—but they typify both the Filipino and Russian virtues or lack of virtue. More than either of us realize, I suspect, we’re brothers and sisters under the skin.

March 29, 2000

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The silliest slogan being bandied around is the catchword: Filipinos Don’t Kill Filipinos. It really should read: No one should kill anybody. After all, one of God’s Ten Commandments is: “Thou shalt not kill.” But Filipinos can and do kill Filipinos. After all, the sin of Cain slaying Abel, his brother, is older than the Old Testament and the Holy Bible. Homicide and murder date back to the cave men of mankind’s prehistory. The reason I’m reminded of that propaganda buzzword, which is usually promoted by rebels when they’re losing the fight (after
provoking a strong military and police backlash against their rampage of kidnapping, rape, massacre and violence), is that Muslim “peace groups” are currently brandishing it to make the cruel armed forces and PNP appear to be viciously bullying and slaying “peace-loving” Muslim Filipinos.

Naturally, our armed forces and the law enforcers of this Republic have been compelled to act to protect peaceful citizens of whatever faith. There’s this report from the so-called Center for the Study of Peace and Democracy in Southern Philippines, which is warning that the “tempers and irrational hatred” now raging in the Lanao provinces could spread to other areas of Mindanao. What nonsense. Those hatred and resentments spread long ago and the hit-and-run encounters have continued unabated. It is the Pan Islamic insurgents, like the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the “lost commands” of the supposedly peaceful Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the fundamentalist Abu Sayyaf, who have been prosecuting that conflict against Christians and the government.

To nobody’s surprise, they’re casting the blame for the inevitable escalation of violence and the disruption of many lives on President Estrada, and our defense and armed forces officials. For centuries, the predominant rule of engagement in Mindanao—dating back, as the Moros themselves boast, to the Spanish colonial past and the American era—has been: *If you attack me, I’ll attack you!* They themselves practice this dictum. So, what’s new? Nothing except that the insurgents are today better armed, better trained (by foreign tactical instructors and imported *mujihadeen*), better financed, and more pugnacious. They want an independent, separate Mindanao. In that case, it’s a rebellion, and in every nation, in every century, rebellions are bloody. The bloodless EDSA People Power revolution was the notable exception that proved the rule. In most countries where the contending forces are almost equally matched, these conflicts are termed “civil wars.” This is a misnomer. Civil wars, as somebody once said in Europe, are the most uncivil and merciless, since they are waged with a bad conscience.

To confirm the previous observation about Cain and Abel, the brother of the slain rebel ex-priest, Father Conrado Balweg, in Abra on New Year’s Eve was the subject of an interview conducted by GMA-Channel 7’s Probe Team last Tuesday. In the televised sequence, the Communist brother of the “executed” former cleric and Cordillera People’s Army leader confessed that he had accompanied the band of
New People’s Army (NPA) guerrillas tasked to kill his elder brother in Malibcong. NPA commander Juvencio “Ka Rudi” Balweg said that the NPA had collectively decided to punish Father Balweg for his “blood debts.” Isn’t that chilling proof enough that Filipinos kill Filipinos, and even blood brothers kill their brothers? Whether the conflict is over ideology, religion, political vendetta, or greed, this is a sad fact of life.

Speaking of the great United States of America, that bastion of democracy, fair play, brotherhood and the land of the free, a terrible Civil War between North and South was waged in 1861, between the Union and the Confederacy as the opposing sides were called. In this all-out struggle, Americans ruthlessly slew their fellow Americans, bombarded and burned down each other’s cities. West Point classmates clashed with each other in pitched battles, in give-no-quarter engagements. Remember the movie, Gone With the Wind? Didn’t we all see the great city of Atlanta (Georgia) reduced to rubble and burned to the ground? No less than 620,000 Americans lost their lives in that conflict, a total that almost equalled the number of Americans killed in all the other wars the US has fought combined. One famous author, James M. McPherson, wrote that “If the same proportion of Americans to the total population were to be killed in a war to be fought today, the number of American war dead would be five million.” What was the cause of this traumatic and painful war? It’s true that President Abraham Lincoln sought to free the Negro slaves (that term “Negro” is no longer politically correct), but the main issue was to preserve the Union. The Southern states, under General Robert E. Lee, wanted to secede from the Union of the United States of America, and so they had to be defeated. So, what’s new?

The Spanish Civil War of 1936–1939 was equally filled with pain and gore. The Communists (including the Soviets), the Anarchists, and most of the western do-gooders, including the Americans, were on one side. There were an International Brigade and an Abraham Lincoln Brigade backing the “Republic.” The attacking forces of Generalissimo Francisco Franco, the Falangists, the Monarchists, the Traditionalists and the Catholic Church (priests and nuns were being massacred by the leftist Republicans) were backed by the Nazi Germans and the Italian Fascists. By the time Franco won and “liberated” Spain from the left-wing “Democratic Republic,” an estimated 750,000 to one million Spaniards had lost their lives.
There’s nothing new under the sun—and certainly not in the conflict in Mindanao. What history shows is that quarrels waged in the name of religion are the most unforgiving. In the Thirty Years’ War, waged in Europe between Catholic armies and Protestant armies (Christian versus Christian), the populations of countries like Germany were reduced by almost one half. What our government is doing in Mindanao is simply its sworn duty. It must preserve the sovereignty and integrity of our Republic—and defend the lives and aspirations, not just the property, of our peaceful citizens. The cost in blood and treasure may be high, but this must be done.

April 2, 2000

Last Tuesday night, President Estrada told me that he was rushing over to the Makati Shangri-La Hotel to address a Shipowners’ Conference. “Do you know,” he said, “that we have 300,000 Filipino seamen crewing aboard foreign flag vessels?”

Somebody must have fed the Chief Executive wrong—or exaggerated—information. We used to have 300,000 Filipino seamen working in ships all over the world, with the notable exception of bottoms belonging to Communist countries. Our boast was that whenever a ship sank anywhere on the seven seas, there were certain to be Filipino sailors sinking along with it.

The awful truth, however, is that we are losing our competitive edge. In fact, according to Nelson Ramirez, the president of the United Filipino Seafarers (UFS) union, from a recent high of approximately 200,000 seamen—officers plus rank-and-file—the Philippines as of 1999 provided only 184,000 seamen.”From January to June of 1999 alone,” Ramirez reported, “we lost some 12,000 jobs which translates to a cumulative loss of fourteen percent as of the middle of 1999.”This is not a piddling loss. Each time Filipinos lose a seafaring job, the country loses income. In terms of foreign exchange earnings, Ramirez estimated, we used to take in about US$2 billion a year, and even as much as $2.5 billion “if all earnings over and above base pay are counted in.”
Our old friend, Feliciano "Fil" Salonga, who's president of Far East Geosystems Co., Inc., a graduate of King's Point, New York (the merchant marine officers' equivalent of the US Naval Academy at Annapolis) and outstanding former officer and shipbuilder, recounts that the late Peter Toundjis, one of the pioneering icons of the ship manning industry, had earlier expressed his alarm over developments threatening our position as the primary supplier of seafarers in international shipping.

Mr. Toundjis, who died last October, attributed the sharp decline in jobs for Filipino seamen from the "hayride days" of the 60s, 70s, and 80s, to "the entry of non-traditional seafaring nationalities and countries into the international seafaring market—mainly Eastern Europeans and other Asians."

One of the biggest challenges, he had pointed out, was the "strong entry of China," meaning the People's Republic of China, with an initial offering of 500,000 men "who are well-trained and literate in English."

Can you beat that? The Communist Chinese who operate ten maritime training schools—increasing fast in number and being upgraded in quality—are stressing proficiency in the English language, while we Filipinos, who had the edge, are quickly discarding and forgetting English. The Chinese have been drafting British and Norwegian professionals into their staffs and faculties to accomplish this end.

Speaking of the Norwegians, Filipino crew still man most of the seagoing Norwegian-flag vessels, but the proportion of them being hired by Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and other European shipowners and manning agencies is fast declining. When this writer was on a trip to Oslo, Trondheim, and Begen, Norway a few years ago, I had occasion to discuss this decline with a number of shipowners and skippers. Most of them voiced the same disappointment.

"In the old days," one captain put it better than most, "we could hire Filipino seamen and put them on board ships immediately, confident of their training and, equally essential, their ability to speak, communicate and understand English."

"What's happened to you?" Another ship manning official exclaimed, overhearing this sally. "Filipino seamen don't speak English anymore. In fact, if we manage to find Filipino seamen nowadays with
some sort of working knowledge of English, we still have to send them back to school, at our company’s expense, to improve their language skills.” The time will come, the Norwegians shrugged, when it might prove too expensive for them to employ Filipinos.

Another problem, Salonga quoted Toundjis further, is the fact that Filipino seamen are being “encouraged, ‘fueled,’ and induced by certain local and foreign influences to gradually price themselves out of the market.” Perhaps he was too diplomatic to pinpoint labor and trade union federation organizers and agitators.

Finally, Toundjis had asserted, “Many foreign ship owners are being driven away by conflicting and contradictory laws, rules, and regulations being promulgated by various government agencies.”

Fil Salonga—who, by the way, is the father of Broadway and London West End Theater star Lea Salonga (of Miss Saigon and Les Miserables fame)—has just proposed to Chairman Felicitto “Tong” Payumo the establishment in the Subic Freeport of an “offshore” Philippine International Register of ships.

The importance of this Subic International Register, which Salonga suggested be called in acronym S.I.R., is that it will register all ships hiring crew members (in addition to the existing “Philippine Flag” register) so that the job security of our seafarers can be protected and the economic implications of the industry explored.

Such S.I.R., he underscored, would help stop the decline in hiring and reverse the situation. For instance, the registry would have total and indisputable control of manning requirements, and prevent “outside interference in matters pertaining to the crew based on the state flag-crew nationality principle.”

As it is, Fil explained, too many “colorum” and piratical operators zip in and out hiring Filipino seamen without any guarantees and legal contracts, paying them slave wages, then dumping them in out-of-the-way foreign places. “These international shipping riffraff have to be stopped,” Salonga stated.

He said that the economic benefits that the Subic Bay Metropolitan Authority (SBMA) and the country could derive could come from registration fees, annual dues and renewal of registration dues, tonnage dues, establishment of management or manning offices, listing and de-listing fees, inspection, approval/disapproval fees, costs, dues, and others, issuance of certificates and licenses.
"BY THE WAY"

“We are not proposing to ‘re-invent the wheel,’ Salonga said. “Way ahead of us are living examples of successful international registries, including the one of Malta that derives enough revenues from its registry to fund as much as 70 percent of its national budget.” I think Tong Payumo ought to act on this proposal quickly. What, after all, can we lose? And we have much to gain.

April 14, 2000

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Yesterday, a newspaper (not the Star) ran a photograph of the handsome Khaddafy Janjalani, chieftain of the Abu Sayyaf. The Arab-type military red polka-dot headdress he wore appeared to jar with his looking like someone not a day out of high school. Yet the deadliest of them all often seem the gentlest, as I found out covering several wars, including the second Indian-Pakistani war.

The fact is, Khaddafy, not unlike his namesake, Moammar Khaddafy (or Ghaddafi), the Libyan leader who is one of the Moro rebellion’s most avid bankrollers), inherited the movement from his older brother, Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani, who died in a military-police operation. The name, Abu Sayyaf, which means, “Bearer of the Sword,” comes out of the Janjalani’s nom de guerre, adopted by him in the days there was fighting between Afghanistan and invading Soviet forces. It comes as no surprise the Abu Sayyaf insurgents are calling for the U.S. to release Ramzi Ahmed Yousef from prison. Yousef masteredmind the World Trade Center bombing in New York. The Abu Sayyaf is absolutely clamoring that Yousef be allowed to walk “in exchange” for Filipino hostages in their keeping. There’s no chance this will happen. Yousef is a bomb-making expert; neither our government nor the Americans would ever want him to receive the chance, which liberty might provide him, to continue to manufacture bombs and explosives. In the summer of 1991, Yousef and Janjalani met in the town of Peshawar, in the Northwest frontier of Pakistan. Janjalani had studied Islamic jurisprudence in Saudi Arabia in the early 1980s (remember, Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait offer many Filipino Moros “scholarships” so they can study in the Middle East). The terrorist Yousef and Janjalani
became fast friends, with the former even brokering the "connection" between Janjalani and the multimillionaire terrorist financier, Osama bin Laden, who forthwith became the Abu Sayyaf's main source of funding.

The book I quoted yesterday, The New Jackals, by London Sunday Times correspondent Simon Reeve (Northeastern University Press, Boston, 1999), is a gold mine of information concerning Abu Sayyaf ties to Yousef and Bin Laden (whose bomb-attacks destroyed the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August, 1998). Reeve, for instance, mentions that "200 other Filipinos" (page 136) fought the Soviets in Afghanistan. Upon their return to the Philippines, these Afghan veterans formed the nucleus of the Abu Sayyaf and their sister-organization, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Extraordinarily successful at recruiting Moros to their cause is another Afghan veteran, the "tall, slender, and bearded" Muhammad Jamal Khalifa, who is occasionally mistaken for Bin Laden himself (he is, in fact, married to one of bin Laden's older sisters). American investigators say Khalifa in 1988 was put in charge by bin Laden of recruiting fighters from "among the 6 million Filipino Muslims," for the ongoing war in Afghanistan. On the idea that he would establish himself in Mindanao, Khalifa set up a rattan furniture-making business as well as various Islamic organizations and "charities," most prominently, the Dawl Imam Al-Shafee Center, also known as the Imam Shafie Institute, in Patikul, a Taosug fishing village in Sulu. He married a Filipina "and helped recruit dozens of young Muslims from the island province of Basilan, and the nearby areas of Cotabato, Maguindanao, Souo (sic) and Tawi-Tawi, also in the Sulu archipelago."

Reeve points out (on page 157) that "Bin Laden pumped money into Filipino terrorist gangs and fostered a new wave of Muslim extremism that swept through the region in the early 1990s. Filipino veterans of the Afghan war then returned home to join Janjalani's Abu Sayyaf." In Peshawar in 1991, it was Khalifa who offered Janjalani funding from his brother-in-law, bin Laden, and persuaded Yousef and another pal, Wali Khan Amin Shah, to "visit the Philippines and train Janjalani's fighters." When the Soviet Red Army beat their retreat from Afghanistan, Janjalani continued travelling back and forth between his home in Basilan, and the Peshawar area, staying in veterans' guesthouses and searching for supporters. This writer has spent quite
a bit of time in Peshawar and nearby Landi Kotal (Khyber Pass), for a different purpose altogether. Since Rudyard Kipling, that bad old bard of Imperialism, had been one of my schoolboy favorites for his barrack-room ballads and stories. His tales of the Khyber Pass, and his northwest frontier poems and anecdotes, set in that area that runs up to Kabul in Afghanistan, provided this youth with true romance and adventure.

The interesting thing about street names there is that they represented a trade. One street was for smugglers, another for coppersmiths. There were specific streets for the goldsmiths, gem merchants, carpet and rug merchants, and drug-dealers. A small alley named, "The Street of the Story-Tellers," required you to press a few greasy bills and coins into the palms of one of these story-tellers, so that as you puffed away at an argeeli or hookah (a water pipe), the old man would spin tales and legends into your ear. (If you didn't understand Urdu or Pukthun), the Pathan language, you, of course, needed an interpreter). It was Pakistan's wild and wooly Northwest. To the south lay an equally romantic city, Rawalpindi. As a government-created capital, next-door Islamabad was dull and dry.

The British journalist, Reeve, describes Osama bin Laden himself as a tall, lanky man, with a high-pitched voice and a thin, fragile body. Osama was born in Riyadh (Saudi Arabia) in 1957, the seventeenth son of one of the city's biggest magnates, Mohammad bin Oud bin Laden, by his eleventh wife, a Syrian woman. His father, Mohammad's, roots were really traceable to South Yemen, in the province of Hadramaout, but the clan moved to Jiddah after the Saudi kingdom was established by Abdelaziz Ibn Saud in 1932. It was Mohammad, an engineer and architect, who founded the family fortune, getting into the king's inner circle by constructing the opulent royal palace in Jiddah. King Faisal, who succeeded to the throne in the early 1960s, decreed that his crony and financial backer, Mohammad bin Laden, be awarded all construction contracts, even briefly making him Minister for Public Works. (The family firm now has an estimated turnover of US$36 billion per annum).

Osama enjoyed the usual wild revels of youth, many of them in Beirut, and was a serial womanizer in the past. Sobering up, he studied civil engineering in the Abdul Aziz University in Jiddah. He earned his own millions working on several projects, although the real windfall
came upon his father's death, at which point he received his fightful inheritance. Prince Turki ibn Faisal ibn Abdelaziz, who became his buddy, was the one who convinced Osama to use his wealth to locate, train, and supply Muslim fighters across the world. Conveniently, the Prince was the head of the Saudi secret service (aha, the Saudi "connection")! It was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan on December 26, 1979, that occasioned a cause to fall on Osama bin Laden's lap. He threw himself heart and soul into the Afghan resistance, flying back and forth between Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan, and then Pakistan, as a fund raiser for the mujaheddin, while helping another sympathizer, a 40-year-old Palestinian named Abdallah Azzam, set up an organization called Mekhtab Al-Khidemat Al-Mujahideen (MAK), which enlisted and transported about 25,000 volunteers from 25 Islamic countries to Afghanistan to put a resistance to the Soviets. He also had his own Islamic Salvation Foundation. (It was Osama bin Laden who suggested that the mujaheddin be provided American "stinger" missiles—dozens of which the Reagan administration promptly dispatched to Afghanistan, complete with instructors.) These weapons provided by the U.S. and Britain are today turned against the West, and us.

Many of Janjali's Moro fighters were schooled in Bin Laden's training camps in Pakistan and just inside the Afghan border. So, let's not expect the Abu Sayyaf to be "bribed" so readily—surely not by Robin Padilla bringing to them 200 sacks of rice. Those mujaheddin, fighting to establish an Islamic state and bent on carving huge chunks out of Mindanao to recover their alleged "ancestral land," are well-funded, well-armed, and relentless.

Will we win the "war"? Unless we rearm and modernize our armed forces, and motivate our men there, that is problematic. Big brave words won't do. "As Muslims," Bin Laden likes to declare, "we believe that when we die, we go to heaven. Before a battle, God sends us 'sequina;' tranquility." If we can't mobilize a military and police force capable of speeding those determined Muslim rebels to "heaven," we'd only find them creating (for us) a hell on earth.

April 17, 2000
“BY THE WAY”

Just when we thought Broadway had gone blink, diminished from a roar to a hiccup, Elton John (yup, the Elton John, brilliantly assisted by his lyricist, Tim Rice, recently ran their special collaborative alchemy on Aida, Giuseppe Verdi’s immortal opera, to transform it into a thoroughly modern, hip and hit musical. Indeed, Broadway’s newest bauble sparkles, surprises, beguiles—from its intelligent and poignant libretto, performed by a star-studded cast playing Nubian slaves in Egypt singing of the freedom that had been theirs before their leveling as the spoils of war, to its digital-technology-enhanced specularity, converging upon the love story of Radames, the Egyptian General whose courage and ferocity upon the field of battle had brought the Nubian slaves’ country to heel, and of Aida, the captive Nubian princess, but not without the zed but always forgiving Princess Amneris, Radames’ Egyptian betrothed, noticing in a blooming operatic mess, if ever there was one!

The musical’s eclectic vision cavalcade includes sphinxes, Egyptian mummy masks, pyramid-themed hats, and shapely women in funky but gossamer phosphorescent tunics that momentarily distract from the theme of the musical, but what the heck! Nothing as exciting, since Cleopatra, has washed up on the Nile. Verdi himself may not recognize it, because when Elton John’s music and Tim Rice’s lyrics converge upon something, this quite literally becomes something new.

The voice in the musical that absolutely thrills is Heather Headley’s who, until her recruitment to play the lead part in Aida, had been in The Lion King. Her soprano voice, coupled with the effortless of her ability to gracefully glide across the stage, is peerless. In her first post performance interview, the dusky-haired beauty (with brains besides; who had attended Northwestern University in Chicago) gushed, “My special thanks go to my Mommy, and to God for His many blessings, especially this one!” I trust God didn’t mind it so much that Heather had put Mommy ahead of Him.

Sherie René Scott, in the opposite role of Amneris, almost—but only almost—held her own as the unfortunately spurned Egyptian Princess. After Headley’s, her performance in the musical elicited the loudest applause. This may sound overly critical, but Adam Pascal, who played General Radames, was a bit of a letdown. His high-pitched, girlish, voice simply did not match up with his other qualities as an appropriately handsome and muscular performer. His dazzling
costume, combined with the way that he moved (a tad too precious),
suggested not so much a general's swagger as a cross dresser's gait.
One could have suspected . . . Next time show me someone without a
moustache!

But you mustn't miss Aida. It soars. It keens. It thunders. It's more
than just Broadway soap opera. Barring its digressions and kinky frills,
it shines up there, in the bright firmament of the performing arts, a
proven classic. It is difficult to obtain tickets to be able to go and watch
it. When I made an inquiry, for weeks in advance the show had already
sold out! I had to depend on my hotel's concierge to work things out
for me (hotel concierges appear to be able to get you anything, but it's
like dealing with a scalper and his prices?) The important thing is I
got to see the show. Having said that, I will also say, the most exciting
theater in New York City, which is anyone's for the asking, occurs
right on NYC's pedestrian sidewalks—through Eastside, Westside,
Greenwhich Village, Tribeca, SOHO, Midtown, Central Park, and so
on. My "hometown" may in places be rank, but it did not get to where
it is without a struggle. Go hit the pavement!

April 26, 2000

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Vice President Al Gore of the US kept 360 international newspaper
editors, publishers, and media industry owners cooling their heels for
an hour and a half, before deigning to turn up at Boston's Old South
Meeting House. With America commemorating the 225th anniversary
of its fight for freedom, Boston's cooptation of the honor of being where
America "was born," is particularly resonant because, in 1776, at the
Old South Meeting House, America's early patriots debated, discussed,
and planned their revolution against Great Britain, thereby bringing
to birth the United States of America. Their forced eviction from this
city over two hundred years ago notwithstanding, the Brits account
for a good half of about 1.7 million tourists who flock to Boston each
year, plunking down about US$7 billion in local spending (attention!
attention! Philippine Department of Tourism!).

Al Gore finally turned up, clean-shaven, as handsome as can be,
dripping with Boy Scout goody-goody two-shoes bonhomie, except
that the personality that went with it, alas and alack, fell flat. Every now and then, in the course of his address to us, he looked up from the lectern, I suppose to check whether we were still there, but the monitor imbedded in it, which doubtlessly was streaming through to him somebody else’s words, was simply too much to resist. What was missing from his speech in terms of a graciousness of delivery, and of that “something” that might have qualified as “conviction,” he overcompensated for with braggadocio. Adverting to this week’s 25th-year commemoration of the end of the Vietnam War (minus a mention of the fact that America had “lost” that war), he sanctimoniously intoned those solemn words about “America’s responsibility to lead the world!,” rife in the vicinity of the high altar of American hubris and superpower conceit. It met with no hep-hep-hoorays, however, from the hundreds of international journalists and publishers whose utility value (to Gore himself anyway) consisted in their being on hand to be hectored. Gore went on to make hay about America’s “unrivalled affluence and influence.” But, Al-Baby, everybody knows that! No need for you to rub it into our faces. The delegates from Western European countries appeared equally unimpressed, offended by the fact that their attendance at that meeting had reduced them to the status of targets of Gore’s contemptuousness toward the Third World.

I will say Gore alienated his listeners with an earful about America’s destiny to lead the world’s barbarian hordes from out of their desert or jungle captivity and into civilization. He turned them off even more by making every motherhood statement imaginable, promising that should “[I be] entrusted with the Presidency (in) November . . . I would see to it America does not lapse into “isolationism and protectionism.” His efforts to come across sounding statesmanlike were further spooked by the swipes he made against Texas Governor George W. Bush, his Republican Party rival, whom he kept referring to as “Governor Bush” (the being that Bush is a mere guvnah, mind you, and not, like himself, the vaz-preysident). You’ve got to admit, though, that Gore, smartly outfitted in a blue tie set against a gray suit, cut a striking figure. No words to match, however, dropped out of his mouth. He came up instead a disappointment. To think I had turned up, all set to like him, thanks to his wife, Tipper.

The International Press Institute (IPI), which was us, representing a total membership drawn from 110 countries (even Africa and India were represented), was, however, grateful Gore showed up, even if it
was very late in the hour when he arrived. The other guy, Georgie Bush, had decided to snub the convention altogether, and maybe he was right to do so since few of us at the convention, as non-U.S. citizens, would be unable to cast any deciding ballot anyway—and, anyway, my young son-in-law, a Pinoy reared in Houston (Texas), had already declared for the Republicans. Bush may actually have been right to avoid the risk of coming before an assembly of inscrutable lions (hyenas)—of IPI delegates, their sharpened pencils poised to report any indiscretion. Until I met Al in the flesh, I had been leaning toward the Democrats, traditionally in greater sympathy with Philippine interests than the GOP elephants. Following that Gore speech, however, delivered with stentorian arrogance, I have begun to rethink my loyalties.

During the question–and–answer period that followed, the many among us who earlier had been prevented by surly Secret Servicemen (these people, in their slack time, must watch nothing but In the Line of Fire-type movies), from making our way to the restrooms on the floor below, and who, as a consequence, throughout Gore’s address had to fight the discomfort of filling bladders, made a mad dash for the restrooms. This process of “evacuation” took such a long time that a great number of us were still downstairs when Gore, on cue, began to make his exit from the hall, glad-handing some from our group who had already returned to the floor above. When we who had taken the rear of this process attempted to join them, we found the mens room door locked because his secret servicemen had decided to hustle him off the premises through the basement, where the men’s room is, in order to escape the hordes of anti-Gore demonstrators on the streets outside. I had seen those demonstrators on entering the building. Painted on one of their placards were the words: “No More Blood and Gore!” and on another: “Gore: America Finances the Death Squads in Colombia!” (I thought to myself: but what about the Leftist death squads in Colombia, financed by cocaine and drug money?)

Oh well! We eventually came out of our sequestration in the locked toilets, happy to have exercised our Fifth Freedom—which is freedom from an embarrassing bladder discharge in that historic hall, of all places.

May 2, 2000
Remember that syrupy old box-office hit of many years past, called, *Love Story*, with Ryan O'Neil and Ali McGraw (the latter, from that time, appears to have dropped out of sight), and its catchy theme, "Love means never having to say, 'I'm sorry.'"

At this moment, millions of people all over the world are sorry they submitted to that seductive word, "love." On the second day of the sneak attack of the "ILOVEYOU" virus, Computer Economics Inc., in the United States, estimated 45 million people had received the bug, dispatched to them by a mischievous guy (or gal) based in Manila, adding that figure, in translation, meant "perhaps $10 billion in damages and lost labor." The National Bureau of Investigation agents has taken into its custody the suspected author of the virus, a fellow by the name of Reomel Ramones, and will, hopefully soon, Irene de Guzman as well, his girlfriend. But not even their detention will mean the cessation of damage to computers and computer systems worldwide, in view of the equally devastating mutations that have ensued from the original virus—already numbering about 60, as of the last count yesterday. Whoever's responsible for it—Reomel, Irene, or anyone else—may not claim it was meant as a playful prank. Considering that the conservative figure of $10 billion that newspapers everywhere say is the total cost of the "damage" on computer systems worldwide caused by the virus, is an utterly diabolical undertaking.

Experts in L.A. who I personally consulted are one in claiming that the "Love Bug" originated in Manila. Even Richard M. Smith thinks so—the Massachusetts-based computer privacy expert who, in tandem with Federik Bjorck of Sweden, and notwithstanding objections from Australia's police authorities, had successfully tracked down the earlier "Melissa" virus—a relatively "primitive" virus that infected some 300,000 computers, causing some $80 million in damage—to "Mikael," an 18-year-old German exchange student in Australia. To be sure, we Filipinos should not take pride in the fact that the hacker is a compatriot, but we ought not "disown" him either. The British did not apologize for the fact that "Jack the Ripper" was one of them, and neither did the Americans in the aftermath of the "Colombine" school massacre, when it became known that the murderous assailant was homegrown. To say that "a mere Pinoy" is not capable of wreaking worldwide-web-based havoc, is racist. It is an instance of "The Third World Striking Back" given that, to do his work, this particular troublemaker had used a temporary phone card at a neighborhood
Internet Café crowded with a ragtag collection of out-of-school computer-hacking aficionados! Metro Manila, in fact, teems with such clubs, in which young people seek to outdo one another, hacking. Many of them positively look “crazy,” with rings and all spilling out of their noses, and faux diamonds encrusting their tongues. They “hate” school, but remain net-surfing geniuses nonetheless.

I was in Boston when the “love” bug scandal erupted. From the Washington Post, however, I learned of Richard Smith’s assertions that whoever had innovated the “Love Bug” virus, plus some twenty other viruses, studies at an Amable Mendoza Aguiluz (AMA) Computer College in Manila. Smith opined the guy had to be a computer science student in his early twenties, because the software used by his programs would be beyond the ability of a normal teenager to deploy. Should Ramones, who is 27, ever be conclusively identified as the hacker, Smith’s words would have been prophetic. Other computer security experts zeroed in on the Philippines for another reason. They pointed out that the 150 lines of computer codes that make up the virus contain a reference to a “GRAMMERSoft Group/Manila.” And in the eight pages of computer code that comprise the virus, researchers turned up the word, Barok, bringing to mind a “Trojan Horse” program, Barok, “written by a man in the Philippines last year” so he could “steal” computer passwords and access codes. The design of the virus was a stroke of inventive genius, although as Roger Thompson of the International Computer Security Association (an Internet security assurance firm in Reston) put it, its inventors did something “pretty dumb”—they filed for copyright protection! Still, who would have guessed that a lowly “bug” from Pandacan would knock out the computer components of these systems?

In any event, the “ILOVEYOU” worm hit the Pentagon’s mainframes, as well as those of the US National Security Agency, the US House of Representatives, the US Senate, the House of Commons in England, the Credit Suisse First Boston, Vodafone, C-Span, FOX TV, the Kennedy Space Center, Time Warner, ABC, ESPN, the Dallas Morning News, to name the few places admitting it. Panicky reports have emanated as well from all over Europe, including Germany, Spain, Italy, France, Britain, Holland, and Norway—although Italian government officials smugly claimed they had not been infected because they used UNIX, not Microsoft. Bill Gates has egg all over his face. Microsoft’s Outlook Express (although other tracks like IRC, USENET News are utilized by
the insidious worm), is the web-imbedded highway that is most used by the bug. Because the "virus" or "worm" is written in VBS, it requires the Windows Scripting Host (WSH) to run. Microsoft's "Internet Explorer" was similarly badly affected.

Put simply, the "worm" ruins files, photos, and the like, replacing them with a copy of the "worm" itself, (not deleting the files but overwriting them with the worm code), making file recovery difficult, if not impossible. Among those hit was Republican presidential candidate, Texas Governor George W. Bush's campaign headquarters in Austin, Texas. The HQ had to shut down after computers became infected late Thursday. The clock was effectively turned backward, disrupting the transmittal via email of scheduling information and news releases from the Republican camp. "Right now," moaned campaign spokesman Ari Fleischer, "it's back to 1990—we're faxing and phoning." The Democrats' bet, Al Gore, had his headquarters singed, too, but only slightly. The gravity of the situation prompted U. S. Pres. Bill Clinton to go on national TV with the announcement: "We've been very fortunate that the government has fared well here..." A euphemism if I ever heard one!

Mutations, that is, variants, of the "love" bug have similarly caused billions of dollars in damage (including downtime and lost time). Capitalizing on the fact that May 14 is "Mother's Day," one such mutation contains the words, "Mother's Day," and is accompanied by a so-called confirmation order, which, naturally, he prints out, for a $326.92 credit-card purchase of a Mother's Day diamond special he is supposed to have made. His curiosity—or indignation—provides the occasion for the virus to strike. Another variant contains, in the e-mail's subject line, the words, "Susitikim shi vakara kavos puodukui..."—meaning, in Lithuanian, "Let's meet this evening for a cup of coffee." Yet another disguises itself as a "virus alert." Still another contains the joke-suggestive key word, "Very Funny." All these variants prey on human nature—on the fact that few around could ever resist such words? Copycat mischief makers abound.

To best protect yourself, turn off your computer, and learn how to use your typewriter instead.

May 10, 2000
When my sister's children were very small (one of them is now a Jesuit priest, the other six are grown up with families of their own), she and Marno, her late husband, found it necessary to teach them, especially every succeeding “baby,” to play “the silence game,” because to cry or to make any kind of noise while they lay in concealment from passing marauders might have brought death to the entire family. Every time brigands were through to have clambered over the banks of the river just below their home in Galayan, Maluso, Basilan, Mercy would whisper, frantically, to the kids, “Silence Game! Silence Game!” In an instant, the kids desisted from every rustling movement, from so much as even a sigh. What was true then is true even more so now. Muslims and Christians in our Deep South have little choice but to endure the tableaux of horror and inhumanity that pile about them. But that is because guns, bladed weapons, rocket launchers, grenades, and a variety of explosives remain in the hands of ruthless men who hesitate not to use them—the more uneducated they are, the more fanatic about the use of violence they tend to be.

The Catholic Church says it always seeks to be irrigated by “the blood of its martyrs”—was it Tertullian who coined the term? To be sure, the soil of Mindanao is soaked with plenty of blood—of Christians, Muslims, and “pagans” alike—although what it gets irrigated with are not the practices of “community,” but inter-ethnic suspicion, vendetta, prejudice, murder. Believe me, it will neither be prayer, nor loudly intoned novenas, nor passages from the Holy Bible and the Koran that will bring peace and development to this troubled island, but the resolute determination of a strong, earnest, and honest government to disarm the bullies, the hoodlums, the self-styled mujahideen, the fierce militias (e.g. the streamlined modern Ylagas), in order to install the rule of law among them, and in the land on which they walk. Then could capital outflows from the Zobels, the Taipans, and the world business community, make their way to Mindanao, to transform its fields into the site of a perpetual bloom, and prompt industrial towers into rising. There is no other way. But like all talk, peace talk is cheap, uttered as easily as “God” or “Allah.” Making peace—that’s what’s difficult.

June 2, 2000
In 1960 on my very first visit to Singapore as a young reporter, I was surprised to find that the people I met there possessed little understanding of Christmas. The city appeared seedier, more backward, than our own Binondo, with its jungle of dingy shop houses and smelly canals. Its main tributary, the Singapore River, had come almost to a standstill, given its sluggish mix of mud and human excrement, which rightly earned for it the nickname, “Stinka-pooh.”

Today, however, all along Shenton Way, where in the not-too-distant past stood the “death houses,” populated by scruffy-looking elderly Chinese who would sleep next to the unadorned coffins they had purchased with their small store of copper coins in hopes that when that day came, some kind stranger would ship their remains back to China for interment, rise sleek and tall edifices, enclosing modern-day Singapore’s global banking and financial powerhouses. Credit for this sea change from the awful backwater it once was into the vibrant city-state it today is, must go to Lee Kuan Yew (or LKY as he is fondly called), the city’s communicative (he personally has penned several books), iron-willed leader, with a “double-first” from Cambridge University in Great Britain, and the indefatigable determination to oversee the city’s total operations, from its positioning in the world community of nations, to the types of shrubs and trees for planting upon this barren, rocky, and smelly formerly British outpost, into a truly livable and successful city. LKY has even expanded its land area by a full third (cleverly deploying “landfill” and “reclamation” technologies for that purpose), establishing upon it Changi International Airport, one of the world’s most impressive.

LKY’s most important challenge, however, consists in his own people. Its citizens today bring an impeccable discipline, a readiness to obey rules, to everything they do, although that was not always so. When LKY first took over, two-thirds of Singapore’s population, consisting of the Chinese who had settled there, were notorious for their rowdiness and lack of discipline. Lee Kuan Yew and his People’s Action Party (PAP), however, persistently worked to resolve that problem, by recruiting into their ranks, not the impeccably-manicured, stylishly-outfitted fellows who you meet there today driving around in their BMWs and power-Benzes, but toughies (the “Middle Road Boys” as they were known), then routinely sending them to street demonstrations contributing to the general unrest, bearing lead pipes
wrapped in the *Straits Times* of the day before, blows from which they never hesitated to rain down upon the heads of the administration's political rivals. Himself a top-notch lawyer, Lee Kuan Yew, routinely invoked the PPSO (Preservation of Public Security Ordinance), an otherwise obscure British-era statute LKY's PAP legislators "retooled" into the Internal Security Act (ISA), permitting the administration's security forces, for tactical interrogation, to hold in detention for months, even years, anyone they so wished without benefit of *habeas corpus* (technically speaking, you were not placed under arrest). If you toed the party line, and regularly reported for work, never would the ISA be invoked against you. But if, instead, you carried on like a flaming human rights activist, the ISA was simply not good for you. A report which came out the other day in *The Straits Times*, about a truck driver placed under arrest "for spitting watermelon seeds out of his truck window," drove home to me the coercive force of the ISA, its power to produce instant and enduring results. Just imagine—if every jeepney, or bus, or truck driver, was caught in Manila for doing the same, would that particular scourge persist? I say this not to denigrate the obvious progress made by Singaporeans who in a single generation threw off their status as the progeny of rickshaw-pulling-coolies in order to assume their new birthright as heirs of financial eminence and middle-class prosperity, but only to project something of the "price" they pay for abiding by the rhetorics of the city-state's Great Leap Forward.

Still, against the general Asian backdrop of misfortune, poverty, and turbulence, Singaporeans stand out, possessing the fourth highest per capita income in the world. They, however, have had to pay a price for it. The late Ferdinand E. Marcos, in the first blush of martial law in the 1970s, had said: "Sa ikauunlad ng bayan, disiplina ang kailangan" (for a nation to progress, discipline is indispensable). In Singapore, if you bring a piece of *durian* into the subway, you pay a hefty fine. If you fail to flush the public toilet, you're penalized with yet another big fine. If you dispose of any form of garbage on the sidewalk, you are likely to be collared by unsleeping watchdogs and heavily fined. So when Singaporeans go across the Causeway into neighboring Johor Baru (J. B.) in Malaysia, their pent-up energies prompt them to throw their garbage out the rolled-down windows of their vehicles, not because they hate Malaysians and want to insult them, but because they want to
do something about which they can cry: “We’re free! We’re free!” Don’t get me wrong. Singaporeans are a generally happy bunch. They view themselves as the residents of the world’s “Finest City.” Among them, however, anything like a “people power” exercise would be futile. They do feel empowered.

So why, the other day in Singapore, did President Estrada announce to the press, “In the Philippines we prefer an abusive press rather than a curtailed press.” Did he mean it, or was he being wistful? At the two-day ASEAN informal summit, Estrada found himself seated between Singapore’s Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and Malaysia’s Dr. Mahathir, no doubt secretly envious of the legacy with which the Brits had left them.

November 26, 2000

HONG KONG—Those who are despondent that there seems to be no “Christmas cheer” this year in demonstration-torn and impeachment-focused Metro Manila can take heart from this “misery loves company” piece of news. Don’t take my word for it. According to Hong Kong’s major English-language daily, South China Morning Post, in a dispatch datelined Bethlehem and Jerusalem, the same has happened in the Holy Land. The Post’s world page Headlined: “Dispirited Bethlehem cancels Christmas.” The article read: “Were the three wise men to set off across the Middle East in pursuit of their star today—assuming they could distinguish it from Israeli military flares and satellites that hang in the sky—they would be in for a severe disappointment. They would arrive to find that, far from marking the 2,000th anniversary of Christ’s birth with celebrations, Bethlehem has cancelled Christmas,” the story said. “After two months of violence, city officials have called off their plans for lavish millennium-year festivities, including more than a dozen concerts in Manger Square. The Christmas lights will not be switched on. At best, there will be modest services, mostly attended by the local Christian Arabs.”

“The curtailment,” the report pointed out, “was inevitable. In the past weeks, Israeli machine gun bullets and grenades have been pounding the buildings in the street opposite the presumed site of
where the shepherds watched their flocks.” You bet. Peace on earth, good will towards men! Just as they did during the first Christmas, King Herod’s henchmen are afoot murdering the Holy Innocents, the little children. The trouble is that the hatred exists on both sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Nobody is innocent. All are at risk. In our own country, hatred and anger seem to rule the land, too. There is no Christmas truce. No cease-fire. And our religious leaders are the ones whipping the people up into frenzy. From the Little Town of Bethlehem to Ayala Avenue and “Chino Roces” (Mendiola) bridge, can men still hark to hear the Herald Angels sing? It’s not Good King Wenceslaus or the Three Kings we think about these December days, but King Erap besieged in his Palace by our religious Shepherds who’ve left their flocks to shift for themselves as they lead protesters to the barricades. “May your hearts be merry and bright,” the old carol sang. That, too, has been cancelled.

It has turned cold here in Hong Kong. Everyone is moving about in sober and heavy business suits, coats, and sweaters. The shops teem with people. Christmas lights and decorations are everywhere, all the halls decked with holy in Central’s Landmark building and in Times Square in Causeway Bay. Hongkong harbor is bedecked with electronic Christmas displays. In Hong Kong? Most of the six million people here may not believe in Jesus Christ, but, hey, they believe that Christmas is the season to be jolly—and ring up the sales. The town is packed. The hotels are full. There’s a mammoth ITU Telecom Asia 2000 convention going on, and two or three other conferences. And there is, of course, the usual horde of Christmas shoppers in from all over Asia. Hong Kong, although no longer as glamorous an entrepot port as it used to be under the British flag, retains its zing. Every type of cuisine is available, cooked in the usual delicious manner. There can, indeed, be no substitute in the whole wide world to rival a Cantonese chef (who gets an Admiral’s pay without having to run an entire Navy). The Cantonese may be noisy, raucous, loud and sometimes uncouth—but they cook up a dream!

Hong Kong has evidently stocked up for the Christmas shopping “rush.” There are Santa Claus dolls ad nauseam, frosty snowmen, golden reindeer prancing. Even a golden ferris wheel in Causeway Bay. Winnie the Pooh “bear” is ubiquitous, attired in every color of the rainbow. There are Woody and Jesse dollars draped all over the landscape, followed by Buzz Lightyear the space-kid, and, of course,
the perennial Hello Kitty (but the moms, yesterday’s child-worshippers of SanRio) are the ones who buy. Goods are everywhere in eye-hurting profusion. Locally-based foreign businessmen, while gratified at the sudden flurry of activity, warn me, dourly, however, that all that glitter and gaiety are only a gay facade. Behind the bright lights and chirrupy crowds lurks the year-round spectre of Unemployment. Scrooge would have loved it here before his transformation. But what the heck; it’s terrific to experience—even if just for a couple of days—that Christmassy feeling, even here among the jolly “unbelievers.”

The thing that can be said about Hong Kong is that everybody works—and everything works. And to think that in the early 1950s, when we Filipinos were prosperous and sassy we used to “pity” the Hongkongers, with that city swamped with refugees from the 1949 takeover of China by the Communist People’s Liberation Army. Squattervilles and shanties were everywhere on the muddy hillsides, while hundreds of thousands of other displaced Chinese lived on squalid sampans and rotting Chinese junks. If the Hongkongers, for all their sometimes obnoxious ways, are prosperous these days, they deserve it. Their success reminds me of that line from the essayist Robert Louis Stevenson: “The hard way is the only enduring way.” That’s what they’ve done. They’ve endured. And we will, too—if we don’t lose heart.

December 5, 2000

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In the aftermath of the bleakest Christmas and New Year in recent memory (an emblem for which being five horrendous bomb blasts that rocked Metro Manila), the peso plummeted to its lowest recorded level—P52:US$1 yesterday morning, and P51:US$1 at the close of trading, placing it at 99 centavos lower than it was worth on Friday, last week’s final trading day. The stock market dropped as well by 3 percent, the largest single-day drop in seven months, aggravating an already spreading global financial slowdown. Even the powerful U.S. appears headed toward a recession. I guess there’s nothing more for you to do than to grit your teeth, beseech Almighty God for His help and blessings, and then put your shoulders to the wheel. No use whining and groaning. You’ll just have to make do with what you’ve got. It’s not
the end of the world. When you’re feeling discouraged and depressed, I particularly suggest you pick a good book (there are many), and scan it for stories of men and women who, in tough times, fought their way through to success.

William J. Bennet, who was former U.S. Pres. Ronald Reagan’s Secretary of Education and Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities under, as well as Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy under Pres. George Bush (the elder), has put out three bestsellers: *The Book of Virtues*, *The Moral Compass*, and *Our Sacred Honor*. They all contain advice from America’s Founding Fathers in stories, letters, poems and speeches. One of Bennet’s favorite subjects is Benjamin Franklin, who started out as a penniless boy, but then ended up a signatory to the U.S. Declaration of Independence. When he was only 26, he wrote his famous *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, filled with “proverbial sentences,” and uncanny tales of people of “industry” and “frugality” who pursued wealth, although in hopes “thereby [of] securing virtue.” Franklin could still equate wealth with virtue, unlike us today who cynically believe that behind every great fortune lies a great crime.

In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a trust fund created by Ben Franklin is still in operation. With only a few coins in his pocket he had, as a boy, run away from home in Boston, arriving in 1723 in Philadelphia. When he died in 1790, his estate (he owned many properties in Philadelphia itself, a home in Boston, pasture lands in Pennsylvania, Georgia and Nova Scotia in Canada), was estimated to be worth more than $250,000, which, in today’s dollars, would have made him a multimillionaire many times over, even a billionaire. In any event, as a young man, despite the struggle to establish a business in Philadelphia, Franklin organized a club, called the *Junto*, for “mutual improvement.” He invited into it mostly poor tradesmen and artisans striving to get ahead, although a cap was placed to it at twelve, to remember Jesus’ twelve Apostles. They exchanged tips, and shared information on prospects that seemed to them promising; and they warned against failure. They provided assistance to “deserving strangers,” who needed a helping hand. The *Junto* even put up the first subscription library in North America. The club, which met every Friday night for thirty years, became a model to other clubs. At the basis of Franklin’s determination to make the *Junto* succeed was his enduring gratitude to two friends who had started him off with their “kind loans.”
Determined "to be useful even after my death, if possible," Franklin inserted a codicil in his will, setting up a trust fund that would provide Boston, his hometown, and Philadelphia, his adoptive city, with a thousand pounds each, in perpetuity. He set up a second trust fund to provide "young married artificers under the age of 25 years, as have served an apprenticeship in the said town, and faithfully fulfilled the duties required... so as to obtain a good moral character..." with the loans they needed to start their businesses, at only five percent interest. In 1990, two hundred years after Franklin's death, the two trust funds were worth $6.5 million dollars! Are there any Ben Franklins to speak of here, in this country? On such people would greatly depend our prospects as a nation of becoming strong and great.

January 3, 2001

When finally it came, the end, for Joseph Ejercito Estrada, came stunningly swiftly. He was, at one moment, the sitting President of the Philippines, but by the next, no longer. It came when scores of thousands of people, in a show of collective power dubbed "People Power II," turned up at the EDSA Shrine to flash their "thumbs down" on Erap, and when in their rejoinder to it, Gen. Angelo T. Reyes, Defense Secretary Orlando Mercado, and an important assortment of other cabinet officials and armed services officers, announced on national TV that they were withdrawing their support of him. He knew at that moment all was lost, quietly exclaiming to someone who was with him at the time, "Patay na kami!" More macho-sounding statements have since been attributed to him, such as, "I'll fight this to the end!," "This is unconstitutional!," "They can kill me, but I'll go on fighting!," but they haven't changed the fact that for him the jig is up. With twelve Justices of the Supreme Court (those who were in town) present to witness the event, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, was sworn as President of the Philippines by Chief Justice Hilario Davide, Jr. In excelsis at long last, Gloria has begun to dispense the functions of her office, to universal acclaim. People want to begin anew, knowing the hard part is yet to come.
On the idea that flattery will get you everywhere, the predictable assortment of balimbing and other late-in-the-day-comers, already are singing the praises of GMA. Instead of fettering her with our usual sermonizing, and our shopping lists of do’s and don’ts, let’s give her a chance to deal with the issues that confront us as a nation in accordance with her own lights and values. There will be time enough to insist upon the various elements of our moralizing in the weeks and months to come. It ought to be said in her favor that in her three days in office, it appears La Gloria seems to know what the right thing to do is. We pray for her success, which will be ours as well.

GMA’s oath taking yesterday at the EDSA Shrine has produced many adventitious stories, including the one about the high court needing to promulgate a “resolution” declaring the Office of the President vacant. What is certain is that Chief Justice Davide had agreed to administer the oath of office to the Vice-President, provided President Estrada resign. But all Mr. Estrada has done so far is request a “five-day transition period,” going from Saturday to Wednesday. Remember, for all practical purposes the Estrada government had collapsed, its ranking and senior officers of the Armed Forces and of the PNP, the Governor of the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, its key Cabinet officers (including the Defense and Finance Secretaries), gone from Estrada’s side. The country was “in limbo,” with no head of state to effectively govern it. The leadership vacuum, it was feared, would prod elements hostile to both Erap and to Gloria to seize the initiative in fomenting anarchy.

Beset with such a fear, Justice Artemio V. Panganiban contacted Chief Justice Davide yesterday morning, urging him to call a meeting of the Justices of the Supreme Court to discuss the matter. Twelve members of the High Tribunal, besides Davide, came to the deliberations. This resulted in twelve of them agreeing to be present at GMA’s oath taking, which Chief Justice Davide was to administer. Three members of the Court were out of town, and so could not attend, but concurred with the decision of their colleagues by telephone. Thus GMA’s oath taking before the Chief Justice in the absence of a written resignation from President Estrada, will be subject to what Sen. Rodolfo Biazon (an ex-Marine, not a legal beagle) calls “legal gobbledygook” and subsequent legal nitpicking.

I’m not about to add to the advice, both solicited and unsolicited, heaping upon her by now. I would only remind her of “advice” that her own dearly departed father, Pres. Diosdado Macapagal, gave in his
radio and TV farewell address to the nation on 29 December 1965. The late Chief Executive said the first pitfall of a President consists in his “isolation from the people and from reality by a cordon of persons who will automatically seek to please him and influence his decisions in the guise of promoting his success but in many cases promoting their own interests.” Another pitfall “is the tremendous temptation of graft and corruption that confronts a President” from which he “should steel himself against participating in graft and tolerating it, particularly by any member of his family.” Third “is the difficult choice between the decisions of a statesman and of a politician.” GMA’s father pointed out that “a President should decide primarily on what is good for the people, irrespective of political consequence, and secondarily only on considerations of his political position.”

The fourth “involves the necessity of an awareness of the preponderant power of powerful and entrenched interests in our society which has created social injustice and prevented the equalization of opportunities for the attainment of a better life by the greatest number.” The fifth “concerns the need to possess a genuine recognition that the basic national problem being the age-long poverty of the masses, the alleviation of the plight of the common people which must be given authentic emphasis.” The sixth “is an impulse to readily use the Presidential power without proper regard for the rule of law.” Macapagal had added that “power is never to be used for its own sake.” The seventh “is a choice of attitude towards criticism, ...whether to be tolerant about it or, out of a sense of power, to cow or suppress it, or corrupt the press by one means or another.” The eighth and last “relates to the possession of an attitude to accept fully the giving up of power at the end of the Presidential term as adjudged by the people and to resist the opiate effect of its vanity for perpetuation.”

If only GMA would observe the eightfold path culled by her own father from his own experience, she will not go wrong. She has now been handed by God the wonderful, almost miraculous opportunity to forge her own legacy and carve out her own place in the hearts of a grateful nation. Or she can mufit. The Presidency, when all is said and done, is not a “role.” It’s a burden and a commitment, but a burden and a duty, glorious and proud.

January 21, 2001
NEW DELHI, India—If you think we’ve got garbage problems, you haven’t seen what it’s like in India, where garbage is controversial—not because its one billion people (12 million in Delhi alone) produces staggering amounts of detritus, but because plastic in their trash gets into the respiratory passageways of some of their gods!

The Brits, overlords of this vast subcontinent for well over two hundred years (Pakistan and Bangladesh included), arrived to discover that over 300 deities populated the Hindu pantheon. There was Vishnu (the “Preserver”), and his various reincarnations in Brahma (who sits on a lotus attached to Vishnu’s navel), in Rama (the deity epitomizing virtue), in Krishna (who was said to flirt with cowgirls), and in Shiva (whose ritual dances played on the themes of destruction and creation). Its many Avatars included the holy lingam (a representation of the erect “penis”) was worshipped in many temples as the source of life. The consort-goddesses were no less ubiquitous, such as Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth (her vahana or vehicle being the owl), Saraswati, consort to Brahma and the goddess of learning and music (her vehicle was the swan); Parvati (the gentle daughter of mountains, worshipped by the Devi cult), as well as Durga, the warrior goddess, who rode the tiger swinging an arsenal of weapons (ranging from the sharp trishul or trident, to maces, swords, bows and arrows), in her eternal battle, along with Kali, the dread goddess, woven into whose garlands was a profusion of skulls, with Evil. Kali specifically served as the revered patroness of the warrior Rajput clans, from whose number sprang the ancient thuggee or assassins who lived by the sword. These formidable goddesses were not the kind you would have wanted to meet at an outing on a dark night, I’ll wager.

A popular god was Ganesha, source of good luck and destroyer of obstacles, whose head was that of an elephant. Each of the aforementioned deities went about on a vahana (vehicle), made sacred by the deity on them. Because Ganesha’s “vehicle” was the rat, rats were considered sacred and were, therefore, not to be exterminated, which meant, even when they raided the grain in barns, depriving humans of their bare-bones sustenance. Vishnu’s sacrosanct vehicle was the winged and beaked man-like Garuda, to this day (thanks to the millennia-old Indian influence) widely revered in Thailand and Indonesia. Monkeys, on the other hand, are revered because their prototype, Hanuman, the monkey god, assisted Lord Rama (hero of so many Ramayana epics
and dances), in his efforts to rescue Queen Sita, his consort, from the ravenous demon King Ravenna. The most-spotted sacred vehicle is the cow, on account of the Hindu belief that Lord Shiva travels around the cosmos on Nandi the bull. Referring to this, the British coined the term, “sacred cow.” That may hold good for Nandi, but India’s other “sacred cows” do not so much go soaring about the cosmos as scavenging about the streets of India’s cities, rummaging for food in its mountainous garbage piles. They may not be killed by devout Hindus, but instead go about unimpeded—even if this is to starve. Devotion to them in earlier Indian life was such that the then shopkeepers sold shoes and other leather goods on the claim they were fashioned out of ahimsa leather, that is, from cowhide harvested, not from abattoir-slaughtered cows, but from cows that had died of natural causes, or had “committed suicide.” But these days, even when not so-minded, cows commit suicide by eating plastic bags strewn in the garbage and then choking to death on them! This is one reason why a chief minister, Mrs. Sheila Dikshit (Yep, that’s her enchanting name), has been conducting a campaign to “Say No to Plastic.” There are large signs proclaiming this all over Delhi and its environs. However, shopkeepers have not been cooperating. They’re still handing over their goods to customers in plastic bags or polyethylene. “Paper bags are always out of stock,” complain some stall owners. In Chandni Chowk, stacks of them—pasted together from what appear to be pages ripped from books and journals—men on bicycles are sometimes seen delivering. To make a display of their cooperation with Mrs. Dikshit, market stall owners in Janpath may just be savaging the literary heritage of the nation. The chairman of the Janpath Market Association, Mr. Madan, vowed to spare no effort to convert his member merchants from “poly” to paper. Save the cows! That’s my motto, too. We can’t have gods choking on plastic.

February 1, 2001

It’s easy to believe the story told by “Vivian”, a Filipina entertainer who arrived at the Manila airport the other day on a plane from Narita, saying she had just escaped from the clutches of those dreaded
Japanese gangsters, the Yakuza. Vivian said there must be at least 1,000 other Pinays held "hostage" in prostitution dens in Osaka, Tokyo, and other major Japanese cities. The girls, as she described it, were held captive under lock and key while not doing their "tricks." Hers is an old, familiar tale. She was recruited to work in Japan as an entertainer or guest relations officer (they no longer use the hackneyed euphemism, "cultural dancer"), but—once put to work in a club—was forced to go out with customers under threat of punishment and have sex with them. The strange thing about Vivian's story is that, when asked whether she would go back to Japan again, she replied that she would be willing to do so, but not to work for the cruel Yakuza again. As she put it: "In Japan, one could easily earn big money." This girl from Alcala, Pangasinan, was one of the lucky ones who got away. Yet she's "willing" to go back?

While being in Japan for a week and a half, I looked into the status of Filipino overseas workers there and was surprised to find that, although the economy over there is way down and unemployment is up, Filipino "workers" are still coming in and growing in number. In 1999 alone, the Japan Immigration Bureau reported a total of 84,767 Filipino "new entrants" to Japan. By last November, this official figure had swelled to 93,165 Filipinos. Our Embassy says that it's not easy to "pin down" the exact number of Filipinos at any one time since the majority of our workers who are "entertainers" come and go under three- or six-month contracts. If we invoke official Japanese statistics, in 1999 there were a total of 166,767 Filipinos. This figure was broken down, as follows: 115,685 registered Filipinos, 36,379 "overstayers", and 84,767 new entrants minus 70,064 departures for the entire year. We can calculate, therefore, that in 1995, there were 107,402 Filipinos there, in 1996 this had gone up to 143,015, then 149,699 in 1997, and 158,740 in 1998.

Just to indicate what proportion of the workers are women, here's the 1999 figure: of the 115,685 registered Filipinos, no less than 98,103 were female. In 1999, about 46,000 entertainers, or to use the "politically correct" term, Overseas Performing Artists (OPA), entered Japan. As of November 2000, that figure had soared to 53,997. The less flattering term, so relished by journalists, is Japayuki. Our OPAs, mostly singers and dancers (hostesses), are employed in clubs and hotel function rooms all over the country. "It's no dream job," one diplomat pointed out, "and there are risks. But it's unfair to moralize. Their pay
is good, or at least better than they can ever hope to get home in the Philippines.” The ladies predominantly come from poor families, I was told, and, often enough, they are the only breadwinners in their families. However, there are girls, too, from middle-income families, including—would you believe?—a number of “not so successful” movie starlets.

Friends took me to an upmarket club in one of the posher districts of Tokyo, which featured Japanese, Thai, and Filipino GROs, in a sophisticated and well-appointed setting. The Filipino girls we encountered were remarkably attractive, poised, and well mannered. The four I interviewed (without revealing myself as a journalist) were tall and chic, and would not have been out of place in Venezia, Giraffe or the Stars’ Restaurant & Bar in Glorietta 4. If you saw them strolling down the Ginza, you would never have imagined they were hostesses. They looked like tourists or convent-school girls. There are, of course, at least 50,000 TNTs or illegals in Japan, but one can’t track them down. They come and go. Some “jump off” ships that call at Japanese ports. Some are smuggled in by the Yakuza and other syndicates. The girls our Embassy most worries about are those who’re employed in out-of-the-way small cities or towns, without access to help in times of exploitation, violence, harassment and emergency. They surely must, by now, “know the score.” But they take a chance and keep coming.

The Yakuza are as brutal and merciless as any criminal organization on earth, but they make an effort to appear “legit” in Japanese society. For years, the Yakuza attempted to appear chivalrous, tracing their roots to the original folk heroes of centuries past. These Machiyokko (servants of the town) were enshrined in legend as fighting the tyranny and evil impositions of the fierce landlords and warlords, the daimyos dating back to the 1600s. The modern gangsters are actually gurentai or hoodlums, whose postwar emergence led to their assembling themselves into Yakuza brotherhoods. The name is said to be derived from a card combination in gambling (8, 9, and 5, or ya-ku-sa) since the Yakuza started out as gambling syndicates, then went on to other rackets including drugs, prostitution and extortion. In ancient times, the gamblers were originally fielded by the shogun or military dictators to fleece laborers of their pay and return the “funds” to the treasuries of the warlords. These slick artists were known as bakuto. The bakuto were the ones who introduced tattooing and the cutting off of fingers (yubitsume) as a sign of apology to the “boss” for mistakes or failures.
For years, as a correspondent covering or visiting Japan, I had been fascinated with the Yakuza and how they operate. Their bosses or "family heads" style themselves as oyabun, in an effort to put themselves on a par with the old daimyos or lords, and the street-level gang members—sometimes termed chimpira ("pricks")—were supposed to be their "samurai". There are reputedly over 150,000 Yakuza members affiliated in 2,000 gangs, which, themselves, belong to a dozen or so "conglomerates." The largest "family" is the Yamaguchi-gumi, based in Osaka and Kobe in the Kansai area, while Tokyo is dominated by the Sumiyoshi-rengo. What's worrying is that in recent years, the Yakuza have established close links with the Chinese Triads or secret societies, the American and Italian Mafia, and the Cali Cartel. They're still not in bed with the predatory Russian Mafiya, but that's in the works. Like the Mafia, they have different levels of authority under their godfather, called oyabun or sometimes kumicho (supreme boss). The underbosses are named skateigashira, and each headquarters chief is called honbucho.

To take one example, consider the lively district of Ikebukuro in Tokyo which is known for "fashion" and boasts the tallest building in the city, the "Sunrise." Ikebukuro is also a haunt of the Yakuza whose button-men conceal their giveaway tattoos by sporting two or three-piece suits, although their artificially curled hair or chiselled brush-cut, sharp white suits and white patent leather pumps, always give them away. They also love to drive huge American cars and, of course, are usually the ones on the street wearing dark or smoked glasses. They dwarf the American Mafia in numbers. With less than half the population of the US, the Yakuza members make the 2,000 American Mafiosi look like a small time organization. Yakuza enterprises, including legitimate ones (like the Yamaguchi-gumi's legitimate Kobe-based corporation, Yamaki, and the gang-operated art galleries, real estate firms, and financial consultancy companies) net an annual income of about $50 billion. British writer Christopher Seymour, who wrote Yakuza Diary, after infiltrating Yakuza society, said that the conglomerate's profits would "easily place them atop the Fortune 500." He reported that their businesses range "from extortion to prostitution, drugs to real estate, stock manipulation to computer hacking."

Unlike the Mafia, the Cali Cartel, or the Union Corse, you'll find Yakuza headquarters in various cities neatly listed in the telephone book. Some of them even hand out calling cards. They are "businessmen" in
the matrix of corporate Japan. When I went to Kobe to assess the damage and interview city officials just two weeks after the 1995 earthquake which devastated that port city, the mayor told me, matter of factly, that the Yakuza were among the first to appear on the scene and rush food, relief supplies, and bottled water to the victims and dazed residents in the immediate aftermath of the cataclysm. For weeks, they maintained first-aid stations, water-supply and food depots, and welfare services. That was a typical Yakuza “public relations” undertaking. But make no mistake. They are thugs and killers.

Several years ago, the famous movie director Juzo Itami (known for his international hits, Tampopo and A Taxing Woman) produced a motion picture called Mimbo no Onna, (known in the US by its American title, The Sweet Science of Japanese Extortion. It was a thinly-disguised dig at the Yakuza, although Itami might have intended it merely as a kind of morality play and a send-up on Japanese society. The press, on the other hand, seized on it as a wake-up call to fight the Yakuza. Itami’s press release was what finally irked them. It said: “Nowadays everybody is afraid of the Yakuza. People drop their eyes to avoid confronting a Yakuza. Those forced to deal with Yakuza have their pride trampled. I cannot forgive the Yakuza for the way they threaten and humiliate society. Through Mimbo no Onna, I want people to see that they can fight the Yakuza and win.” That was the last straw. Itami was ambushed outside his Tokyo home. The local Goto-gumi sent its hit men to do the job. Television news crews, rushing to the scene, got live footage of the wounded artists being brought to the hospital. Itami was undaunted. His face “dramatically” bandaged, he appeared on TV to make another public appeal for the citizenry to combat and stop Yakuza terror. The film’s box-office success, however, didn’t stop the Yakuza. They’re still everywhere—and right here in the Philippines.

Incidentally, it’s not only entertainers who are drawn to Japan. Japanese firms and the regional branches of international financial companies also hire Filipino engineers, skilled workers and IT (Information Technology) professionals. Japan, in fact, is on an “IT” kick, but is hampered by the lack of knowledge and usage of English widespread enough. Therefore, Filipinos come in handy. (You can find such Pinoy “knowledge workers” employed in Okinawa, for instance, doing projects for Japanese corporations doing business with the U. S. bases there).
Although Japan's immigration policy bans the acceptance of ordinary workers in nonskilled or low-skill categories, such as "laborers" in the service industries, e.g. waiters and waitresses, personnel from the Philippines and other countries still manage to land jobs there, legally or illegally. What makes working in Japan, whatever the hardships or risks, attractive is the pay. The highest minimum daily wage, which obtains in Tokyo is ¥5,559 or roughly US$55. The lowest wage scales are found in Aomori, Akita and Miyazaki Prefectures, but salaries there still come to ¥4,795 daily or about US$48. In Metro Manila, our workers still labor under the minimum wage of just above P200 daily. At the worst, a Filipino worker in Japan can expect ten times more pay. The Japanese authorities, to be sure, are trying to crack down on the hiring of so-called low-skilled laborers. In February 2000 last year, the immigration law was amended making overstaying and illegal work a more serious offense, imposing stiffer penalties for both employees and those who employ them. This move generated much alarm, but the anticipated massive exodus never took place.

The most interesting and potentially far-reaching aspect of the Filipino influx into Japan is the large number of marriages, usually between Filipino women and Japanese men, thereby increasing the number of Japanese-Filipino children. In 1999 alone, there were 6,515 marriages between Filipinos and Japanese. The figure has remained above the 6,000 mark since 1995 (with the top-statistic of 7,250 marriages reported in 1995 itself). The Japanese Ministry of General Affairs reported 5,265 births from these unions in 1998 alone. This trend is the natural offshoot of an entertainment industry which deploys our women to Japan in substantial numbers. The long-term consequences of this would be a very interesting area of future study. This, for starters, could be the beginning of the end of the vaunted myth of a homogeneous Japan today coping with the stresses of an increasingly multinational society. And yet, Japan remains a mysterious and unpredictable land. She is a nation that keeps her secrets jealously shrouded in shadow behind the glare of neon lights.

Whenever I am in Japan, whether in Osaka, Okinawa, and Tokyo on this last trip, or in Kyoto, Nara, Kobe, Nagoya or even Fukuoka—I listen for the immemorial sounds of the old Japan I knew in my younger days when I first went there as a student and later a reporter. These sounds are nowadays obscured by the clatter and chatter of the crowds as
they rush to and from factory and office, and the yell as the conductor cheerfully shoves commuters into a subway train. But they’re still there—the log hitting the out-of-tune bell in a Shinto shrine; the wind fluttering through little chimes; the tinkle of the *samisen* and a snatch of *koto* music wafted on the night wind. They defy time. Nay, they are invincible against time. Japan is in the economic doldrums. Japanese banks, saddled with billions of yen in bad debts and obfuscation, are shaky. Yet, Japan will endure. Prime Ministers like Yoshiro Mori, soon to depart, may come and go. But that “team”, the Japanese nation, has steel in its spirit and suppleness of the bamboo to go on forever. But not unchanged.

March 21, 2001

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In ways as varied as they themselves are various, Filipinos throughout the archipelago celebrated Easter Sunday yesterday, along with its themes of prayer, rejoicing, “rebirth.” I myself took part in an Easter service on Mt. Pinatubo, at the Hidden Temple Shrine in Palan, San Marcelino, Zambales. Driving from Subic, it takes about a half an hour to get to. Hundreds of devotees from Manila and the provinces around were at the Mass and service, including Gov. Vic Magsaysay, *Hermano Mayor* of this year’s celebrations. Vic, an original from this land of sweet and ripened mangoes, is running for reelection as governor of Zambales, and so it was from the campaign trail that he came in to celebrate Easter with us, on a wind-carressed hilltop, in the shadows of the world-renowned Pinatubo. A number of Aeta families from the neighborhood, who came with their small children, even joined us at the Mass. People here refer to the Aetas as *yung mga kulot,* “the curly-hairied ones.”

In my hometown, Sto. Domingo, Ilocos Sur, holy rivalries between Catholics and Aglipayans, the town’s two largest constituencies, have ratcheted up Easter Sunday’s status as the most important religious event of the year, more so than even Christmas. What served as the Catholic stronghold, was the town’s centuries-old Spanish-colonial-era-built church. To our mother’s delight, my brothers and I served at
Mass there whenever we were in town. Us boys enjoyed congregating in the Church’s spacious courtyard, to gain perspective on all the pretty girls who came through, their eyes modestly fixed on the ground ahead, studiously avoiding your attentive, admiring gaze. The Aglipayans had a smaller, although very active church, diagonally across the Plaza from the Catholic one. On the Plaza and surrounding streets on big Church occasions, the two groups, Catholics and Aglipayans, liked to “square off.” Now, the Sugar Bowl equivalent of this religious clash of the titans was the glorious Easter Dawn procession, at which people would cry out, “Nag-ungaren! Nag-ungaren!” (He is risen as he said! He is risen!), while they walked in procession behind the priest and his retinue of candle-bearing, silver-incenser-swinging acolytes, the brisk morning air around them quickly filling with perfumed smoke. Because the Aglipayans always mounted their own procession at the same time and following the same route as the Catholics, the two groups, inevitably, would bump into each other on the streets. Glares would at that point be exchanged—between the “true believers” in the Catholic group and, from their perspective, the “heretics” and “apostates” in the other group. They played out their rivalries, however, mostly for fun.

The Easter “ritual” peaked with the salubong, when the statue of the Blessed Mother met the statue of the Risen Jesus, underneath a richly decorated arch, with a gigantic artificial flower suspended from its highest point. Out of this flower, its closed petals slowly mechanically opening, an “angel” (a cherub-faced little girl who had been selected for the part from one of the town’s first families), emerged who would then be hoisted down close enough to Our Blessed Mother’s head so as to be able to throw rose petals upon it. One of my most embarrassing moments occurred when a young cousin of ours played in the role of this little angel. When Our Lady’s carosa came to a stop directly underneath the arch to meet the Risen Lord’s carosa, the petal-like “prison” enclosing the expectant cherub above, and much to the horror of everybody, jammed. The “flower” simply would not open, causing our little cousin to break out in audible sobs. The Aglipayans who heard it snickered. An agile male cousin, Manong Pepit (he died serving in the US Navy, many years later), and I, clambered up the scaffolding with not a moment to lose, to “free” our trapped girl-angel. Following a few frantic minutes, Manong Pepit managed to swing himself above the contraption serving as the “flower.” Since the ropes had gotten
all-entangled, he had to pry the flower open with his bare hands. At the appearance of a familiar face, our little angel quickly regained her composure, and began to do what she had rehearsed many times to do—scattering about her supply of rose petals. It did not faze here that both Our Lord’s and Our Lady’s carosa had already moved out. Still, the rosebuds had missed their mark. It’s lucky our little cousin didn’t join the Air Force as a grown-up; she would have abjectly failed as a bombardier. Oh, well.

Although embarrassed and chastened by the incident, we had a good laugh over it. All’s well that ends well. What I have just recounted happened a long time ago, although the memory of it is vividly etched on my mind. I will say, though, that memory plays its tricks on you. Trivial occurrences imbed themselves decisively upon its folds. Objectively momentous events sometimes slip away. What else can I say? Nostalgia is the kingdom of the old. Easter morning always brings with it memories of our Golden Yesterday, when the world was young, and heartbreak was not even a cloud on the horizon.

April 16, 2001

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In the Inquirer yesterday, Minyong Ordoñez wrote: “A recent world survey on people happiness shows Filipinos scoring the highest (92 percent) on happiness.” He also notes we got “parallel high scores (98 percent) on the importance of religion in our lives.” Other countries that got average scores in relation to that latter question were the United States (83 percent), Spain (55 percent), South Korea (51 percent), Taiwan (47 percent), Japan (23 percent) and China (16 percent). Communist China’s score indicates it doesn’t think much about religion—just look at how it treats the Falun Gong.

Passing through Rome on a swing through Europe several years ago, I got together with Ambassador Sergio Barrera, Jr., our envoy to the Quirinale, and an old friend, on the idea he would take me to meet a sampling of Filipinos living and working in Rome (there are 200,000 of them in Italy, many there on a TNT basis, yet popular with and trusted by their Italian employers). Thereupon, Serge brought me to a church. “Why a church?,” I asked Serge, a little confused. “Because it’s
Sunday, and that’s where you’ll find our kababayan,” he said. So that
day we simply hopped from church to church, whichever had a Sunday
Mass. Ambassador Barrera was never so right. Europe has more than
its fair share, it seems, of awesome cathedrals, churches, chapels, and
duomos, but which on Sundays tend to be operational at best at 50
percent capacity, comprised mostly of visiting American tourists,
and Filipinos (both resident and tourist). My experience leads me to
conclude that Americans and Filipinos comprise two of the world’s
most prayerful constituencies. Americans hold both E Pluribus Unum
(Out of Many, One), and In God We Trust (notwithstanding the fact
that the latter adage begs the cynical retort, “Others Pay Cash”).

At commencement exercises in schools, student valedictorians
and salutatorians thank God, and their parents, in that order.
Commencement speakers similarly liberally invoke the name of God.
Their auditors, I guess, also thank God when the speeches end, because
that means they and their children can get on to a real celebration.
In my early childhood, my late father, a politician, thought he would
jumpstart my “destined career” in politics, but he changed his mind
later, declaring politics would only break my heart. That seemed a
bit strange, coming from him who three times before the War had
successfully served in both Congress and the Philippine National
Assembly. The War cut his political career short because he had
generously and bravely responded to the nation’s call to arms, dying, a
few years following that, at the age of 43, from the ravages of the Death
March and all. In any case, he told me at the age of four, a “short”
speech is better than a long one, following up his advice with the adage,
"Saluyot and bagoong make the Ilocano nation strong!"

This is partly true but, in retrospect, what makes the Ilocano nation,
and, indeed, our entire Filipino nation, “strong,” is its strong belief in
God’s goodness and love and the power of prayer. On the other side of
all our faults, weaknesses, shortcomings, and deeply dark sins, God’s
redemptive love holds sway, sustaining our people-hood. I would not
wish it to be any other way.

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