Well, it’s done. Former President Estrada and his son, Jinggoy Estrada (San Juan’s mayor), were arrested yesterday afternoon and whisked off from the Estrada residence in North Greenhills to Camp Crame. There was a brief confrontation between pro-Erap demonstrators and supporters and the police, scuffles, and earlier the use of “water cannon” when Erap’s “defenders” started throwing stones at the police and threatening them. But by and large, there were few casualties. After all, there were almost as many policemen as protesters. In the end, the deposed President accompanied by Dra. Loi Estrada, the former First Lady, were bundled into a Mark III van and brought quietly out, surrounded by a phalanx of 500 cops who walked in front, at both sides of it, and behind it as in a funeral procession. The “arrest” occupied the top slots in the ensuing news programs of the Cable News Network (CNN), the British Broadcasting Corp. (BBC) and other international TV channels worldwide. And it’s big news, indeed. It’s not every day that a former Chief Executive, who rode in triumph to the Palace on the crest of a landslide vote less than three years earlier is hustled off to prison. As the Bible exclaims: “How the mighty are fallen!”

There’s something infinitely sad about a former President being taken off to jail, his term uncompleted. One day he was on top of the world, addressed in respectful tones as “Your Excellency,” the cynosure of all eyes, the object of not just admiration but utter sycophancy, a commander with the power to summon the Army, Navy, Air Force, and the entire police force with a snap of his fingers, the recipient of ceremonial honors and 21-gun salutes, a peer and confidante of other Chiefs of State around the planet, a leader presiding over mammoth forums and glittering Palace receptions. Then, yesterday, a man bowed under the weight of adversity and disappointment, bereft of his erstwhile authority and powers, a dignitary stripped of his dignity, an idol toppled precipitately from his pedestal—a man deserted by many of his friends (his greedy cronies, in fact, skipping town to avoid being tarred and feathered alongside him).

Erap was wearing a black shirt and beige jacket looking crestfallen as the police took mug shots of him and fingerprinted him. His blood pressure was taken. One would have to be hardhearted and insensitive not to pity him in that hour. His rise and fall had all the elements of a classical Greek tragedy. The dazzling ascent to the heights of Mount Olympus, like Apollo (whom Homer called “the
far-darter”), the stirring hosannas sung to the hero’s glory, the crowning of his brow with laurel leaves that withered all too soon. Then, one doom-struck day, a thunderbolt from above striking the titan’s brow, sending him from the dizzying heights to the lowest depths in a terrible fall from grace.

What went wrong? One certainly is moved to ask. The Greeks, the ancient race who supplied us with the term demos (the people or the masses), hence “democracy”, derived from the even more specific term demokratia (literally, “people power”) and polis (the self-regulating city-state), hence our modern word, “politics”, had a word for it—hubris. Some of the mightiest champions of Greek mythology and history were felled by the same hubris, something that goes beyond mere pride: the conceit of feeling invincible. It was hubris, alas, that brought the otherwise likeable Erap down. His appetites and his amorality (not just puny immorality) were what sapped him of his strength and popularity. He was not a monster, whatever his enemies and detractors say, but his indiscretions were monstrous.

And so, a fallen President has ended up behind bars. Now that the anxiety and drama of his arrest are over, and the cases against him are being deliberated, let me say that there should be nothing wrong with according a former President and Chief of State—no matter how disgraced—a more comfortable prison. It was the late Dictator Ferdinand E. Marcos whose martial law regime popularized the slogan (which it did not observe), lahat pantay-pantay (“everybody equal”). But how many “former” presidents have we had? Erap, unwillingly enough, has made history. He’s the first Filipino president to get arrested and thrown in the carcel or hoosegow. Perhaps he won’t be the last. That being said, a President, who’s charged with uncommon crimes should not be treated like a common criminal. He ought to be accorded his just share of dignity and respect, particularly when he still has not been convicted.

April 26, 2001

As a product of the ratio studiorum who spent fourteen years under Jesuit tutelage, from the Ateneo Grade School to Fordham University
in New York, what can I say? I've had wonderful Jesuit professors, and others not so wonderful. Jesuits sometimes angrily disagree with each other, and, in my time, whenever we played with them on the hard court, some of the sainted Padres played dirty basketball. (A venial sin, requiring trips to the school clinic, not the confessional—although we students were compelled to confess “once a week” and submit a signed confession slip to prove we had done it.)

Ninoy Aquino whose heroic death anniversary we commemorated yesterday was tainted with the Jesuit “spirit”, although, “like a school drop-out” (he quipped), Ninoy also studied in St. Joseph’s, San Beda, and the University of the Philippines. I remember the day I fired him from The Guidon because of his bad grammar and syntax. He scratched his head, grinned sheepishly, and went out to become a cheer leader. (He later joined The Manila Times, where grammar wasn’t necessary, and became famous at 17 as the youngest reporter to cover the Korean War. Anyway, the then Times Editor-in-Chief Dave Boguslav, who loved Ninoy’s cheeky attitude, “translated” all his dispatches from the war front into English.)

Ninoy was a never-say-die campus figure in those halcyon days. Why did he want so much to become a cheer leader? Because, he admitted without guile, he wanted to lead the Fabilion Fee in the center court in a cute uniform, with all the coeds and convent-school girls in the NCAA stands in support of the “Blue Eagles,” admiring him. Well, he accomplished just that. I remember him vividly, leading the “Blue Babble Battalion,” the cheering squad, in Fabilion; “Fight, Fight, Blue and White!” and “Blue Eagle the King” as if it were only yesterday—with a blissful smile on his face. The Ateneo students, under the great Fr. Henry Lee Irwin, S.J., had put on a memorable stage play about the life and death of the English martyr, Fr. Edmund Campion (S.J., of course), entitled Who Ride on White Horses. And that, in its own way, must have been one of the factors that profoundly moved Ninoy to be one of the heroes “who ride on white horses”, matching Father Campion’s martyrdom at Tyburn (the priest was hanged, drawn, and quartered by the English government) with a martyrdom of his own, on that tragic airport tarmac on August 21, 1983. I had tried to dissuade Ninoy from coming home to face Marcos, in a bid to convince him to return the country to democracy, saying: “They will kill you!” And his reply was: “If I should die, then so be it (his favorite phrase). But I hope my death will move the Filipino people to stand up and fight for
themselves.” I thought that Ninoy was wrong—but he was right. As we marched him to his grave, we all resolved, millions strong, to stand up and fight for ourselves.

My greatest badge of honor, I’ll always feel, is for Ninoy, over the years, to have affectionately called me “Brod”, and for the privilege of having been his cellmate in military prison (in ISAFP prison, incidentally) in the maximum security compound of Fort Bonifacio. When we were released, Ninoy was to remain in solitary confinement for seven years and seven months. But his fighting spirit never dimmed. God bless you, Ninoy. You will never be forgotten.

But back to the Jesuits. Can they be trusted? My late father, Benito T. Soliven, was a Jesuit graduate, too. (He studied in the seminary in Vigan, Ilocos Sur, and had his ratio studiorum in Spanish, Latin, and ancient Greek). Being a second-generation disciple (and subsequently skeptic), I’m reminded of Homer’s Iliad, when the warning about bringing the “Trojan Horse” into the fortified city was voiced: Timeo Danaos utiam et dona ferentes (“I fear the Greeks even when bearing gifts”). The warning went unheeded, and in the night, when the “victorious” warriors and people of Troy, having celebrated with wine and frolic, fell asleep, the Greeks hidden inside the huge wooden horse descended, opened the city gates, letting the Greek host into the walled fortress, to slaughter the wine-drugged and surprised Trojans.

When the Jesuits come into the picture full of self-righteousness, I feel the same tremor of uneasiness that suffused the ill-starred Cassandra. The Jesuits have, for centuries, been disturbers of the peace. When St. Íñigo de Oñar y Loyola, a Spanish officer crippled by a battle wound at Pamplona, turned to religion and founded the Jesuit Order in 1559 along military lines, he was called “the lame man who looks at the stars.” The Jesuits have since not as often looked at the stars, as in the dark corners of the human heart. They did not even give themselves the name “Jesuit,” it was bestowed on them by outsiders, probably in derision and dislike. In our own language, switik, derived from “Heswita”, means too cunning or too clever. Well, clever they are. On November 19, 1775, the Society of Jesus was dissolved by Rome. Their head then, Fr. Lorenzo Ricci, was imprisoned. However, the Jesuits were “restored” in 1814.

In South America it was the Jesuits who invented “Liberation Theology,” which compared Communism with the idealism of Jesus Christ. When the Marxist Sandinistas seized power in Nicaragua, one
of their leaders and later Cabinet members was a Jesuit. Need we say more? There’s more. This writer went to Cuba for a few months in 1960 to write a series of articles on why the “Bay of Pigs” (Bahia de Cochinos) invasion had miserably failed. A couple of days after the “26 de Julio” national day (Fidel Castro had delivered a three-hour speech in the Plaza Civica while we all wilted in the sun), we visited Fidel. (His guests of honor were Russia’s Cosmonaut hero Yuri Gagarin, and Compañero Che Guevara). When Castro learned I had studied under the Jesuits, he boomed: “Hermano, soy Jesuita tambien!” (Brother, I’m a Jesuit Boy, too). It turned out that Fidel Castro Ruiz had grown up under Jesuit tutelage, in the Colegio Dolores and the Colegio Belen until he went to the University of Havana for Law. Which is probably why, when Fidel and his Barbudos came down from the Sierra Maestra mountains and seized power (sending the Dictator Fulgencio Batista fleeing for his life), one of his first acts was to expel and ban the Jesuits from Cuba.

August 22, 2001

We do not live in a safe and secure world. Neither did Joseph and Mary when they went to Bethlehem for Jesus, the Son of God, to be born. This is an important part of the Christmas story that we tend to forget—but it poses a lesson for us in these times troubled by problems, mind you, which are worldwide, and not confined to us in the Philippines.

Think of the Bible story! Jesus could not have been more than a few days old before Mary and Joseph, with their Holy Babe in Mary's arms, had to flee into Egypt to escape the wrath of the king, the cruel and paranoid Herod. The king had been told that a male child had been born in Bethlehem of Judah, who was to become “King of the Jews”! Seeing the advent of such a child as a threat to his throne, Herod massacred all male infants in sight, the so-called Innocents. But the Holy Couple, forewarned by an Angel, fled with their child across the desert of the Sinai into Cairo. Of course, the place wasn’t called “Cairo” in those days, and only one of the four Evangelists, St. Matthew (the tax-collector), mentions the flight into Egypt. And yet this incident in the life of Christ has always captured the imagination of artists. There are paintings from the earliest times showing the Holy Family travelling
under the protective mantle of night, or journeying under starlight beneath the shadow of the Pyramids of Gizah. Then there are the words of the prophet attributed to Almighty God: “Out of Egypt have I called my Son....”

Years ago, when we were in the Middle East, my wife and I drove to Mataria (about six miles from downtown Cairo) in the vicinity of Heliopolis where Egypt’s President Hosni Mubarak lived. I wonder if he still lives there. In any event, Heliopolis is the “city” sacred to the ancient Egyptian god Ra, Lord of the Sun, and to Horus, god of the Sky—the falcon-headed god (son of Osiris, god of the Underworld and Isis, Mother of the Earth). If you’ll recall those colorful archaeological photographs, or those artifacts from excavated tombs in the museum, some of the sarcophagi of the Pharaohs were fashioned in the shape of Horus and his falcon head—for he is the symbol of resurrection and life after death in which the Egyptians of antiquity had devoutly believed. (Horus was, to the Greeks, in turn, the Phoenix bird, rising immortal from its own ashes—geez, just check it out with Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets.) Perhaps this is even why today’s Egyptians, ever conscious of their past, had located their airport at Heliopolis.

But Heliopolis has even greater Christian connotation. Not far from the famed Youss of Kamal Palace is to be found a street named Shagaret Mariam (The Street of Mary’s Tree). In this area—I trust it still stands—one found a sycamore tree, gnarled with age but still green, protected by a high pink wall, in the shade of which the Holy Family is said to have rested at the end of their flight into Egypt. The little grove of sycamores, reputedly, was planted by Queen Cleopatra VII—the last of the line of Pharaohs descended from Ptolemy, a general of Alexander the Great. Cleopatra (whom everyone remembers in the guise of Elizabeth Taylor despite the more recent Hallmark version) was actually not Egyptian but Greek, and was, indeed, the lover of Julius Caesar with whom she had a son, Caesarion. Her second lover as every novelist and movie buff knows, was Mark Anthony. It was Mark Anthony, the Cairenes told me, who had presented those sycamores—trees not indigenous to Egypt—to her. Legend says that to tend her gardens of sycamore and fragrant balsam, she had “imported” a colony of Hebrew gardeners. It was only logical, therefore, for Joseph, Mary, and their new-born child to have sought refuge with this settlement of fellow Jews.

The French Jesuits many years ago built a lovely little church a few meters away from this garden of herbs. There is where we went on our
pilgrimage. Rain had been pouring all day, a novelty for desert-rimmed Cairo where it seldom rains, and desert sand had been churned into desert mud. The streets of the city were in flood since, used to sunny days without end, the Cairenes obviously had not prepared enough gutters to accommodate a cloudburst. When we entered the courtyard of the Church of the Holy Family, however, despite the drizzle, birds greeted us with happy snatches of song as they flitted through the branches, it was as though the noise and turmoil of the crowded streets outside had faded away, and here was an oasis of peace and tranquility. Over the entrance to the church were inscribed the words: Sanctae Familiae in Aegypto Exsult. Within the chapel, above the high altar, one saw the figures of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Hovering above them in the upper nave flew the Holy Spirit in His usual Shape of the Dove. On each side were charming frescoes portraying the Flight into Egypt and the Arrival in Heliopolis. Jesus lived here for the first years of his life—until the death of the wicked Herod and of his son Archelaus permitted the Holy Family to return to Palestine in safety. From the moment one entered the serene gloom of this church, all doubt vanished. Here was, truly, the place where He had lived and played.

The traveller must learn to distinguish between the Egypt of Stone and the Egypt of Men. The Egypt of thirty-three pharaonic dynasties disappeared. The conversion of Egypt to Christianity was the achievement of St. Mark, the Evangelist. Under the spell of his teaching, Egyptians abandoned the gods of the Pharaohs and embraced Christ. Concealed behind the Pyramids and mosques are thousands of Christian churches belonging to this period. Within the drum-roll of great and holy names were those of St. Clement of Alexandria, St. Athanasius, Origen, and St. Anthony, the founder of monasticism.

In Europe, would not a 1,500-year-old monastery be greatly venerated? Egypt abounds in such monasteries, like the monastery of St. Jeremy near Memphis (not to be confused with Memphis, Tennessee, the home of Graceland and Elvis, after which it is named). That monastery was built in the Fourth Century A.D. ! Then there is the old Terenutis in an almond-shaped valley named the Wadi Natrun, to the west of Gizah. Thousands of paintings, icons, papyri with sacred texts, glass chalices, illustrated bibles, bear witness to this wonderful Christian heritage. The crowning proof of Egypt being the first stronghold of Christianity was that when the Muslim Arabs swept over the country to convert the people with the Qu’ran of Allah and the sword of Islam, they referred to
the Christians as “Copts” which only means “The Egyptians.” Thus the
Coptic Church is the church of the Egyptians. Their Masses today are
still intoned in the dead tongue of the Pharaohs, which vanished with
the introduction of Arabic into the daily life of Egypt. Most of the Copts,
in the intervening centuries, became Muslim, but a few million remain
with their old rituals and their own Patriarch or “Pope”.

The name, Cairo, of course, is Arabic. It is a corruption of the
appellation, El Kahira (The Victorious One) given to their Arab
encampment by the Fatimid conquerors of Egypt in the year 969 AD.
It is today a capital dominated by a graceful but formidable Citadel,
with domed cupola and soaring minarets, erected by that great Kurdish
warrior, Salah Al-Din Ayyubi (known to the West as the great Saladin).
From the Citadel’s frowning walls, in the 12th century, Saladin led his
Saracen armies to do battle with the Crusaders of England’s Richard the
Lionhearted. Cairo is now the city of a thousand minarets from which
the muezzin call the faithful to prayer five times a day—proclaiming
there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His prophet. Yet, behind
the echoing call of the muezzin, waft the Christian prayers of those who
remain true to the faith of the Copts, and of St. Mark the Evangelist, and
to the memory of the Child Jesus who once lived and laughed among
them, in the Land of Egypt.

Religion is what inspires and unites mankind in the worship of God.
It also divides mankind—with the sword. This is something, sadly,
which may deplorably persist until the Last Gasp of Mankind. Yet hope
springs eternal, as they always say. Who knows? There may yet come
a day, unglimpsed in the dim future, when there will be reconciliation
and peace. *Inshallah*, or, as God commands it, for the same kind of
faith—that sometimes whips men to battle—can also melt their hearts
and blend them into one. One thing has not changed: The meaning of
Christmas. I wish you the best of everything, this holy and happy season!

December 24, 2002

Foreign Affairs Secretary Alberto “Bert” Romulo told me Sunday night
that former Vice-Pres. Teofisto Guingona, our Ambassador-designate to
Beijing, may have to wait until May to take over his post in the capital of
the People's Republic of China. This is because, Bert said, China's President Hu Jintao will be coming to Manila on a state visit from April 26 to 28, and no changes can be implemented until after the visit. I was lucky to have caught Brother Bert (as we've called each other for many years) during a "stop-over" in Manila. In the past few weeks, our tireless Foreign Secretary had been on the road—rocketing from Beijing to Bangkok to Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. In Bangkok he talked with Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his Foreign Minister counterpart Dr. Surakiart Sathirathai and in Malaysia, with Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi and Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar. Secretary Romulo also left for Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam, to pay a call on His Majesty, Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah and Foreign Minister Prince Mohamed Bolkiah. During our dinner Bert described this series of getting-to-know-you and confidence-building meetings as "my one-night stands."

In China, of course, his hosts had been Premier Wen Jiabao—who had come into "power" in 2002, along with President Hu Jintao. He, along with Hu, had been one of the four young leaders anointed by the late Chairman Deng Xiaoping himself to be the "future" of the Party on the recommendation of his "head-hunters", Gansu's First Party Secretary Song Ping, an old pal of Deng's. Romulo also held extensive meetings in Beijing with Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing, who had also been very close to the late Chairman Deng Xiaoping, the man who had set China on the road to modernization. Li, Bert recounted, had said he had been present as one of the note-takers when Deng first reminded the Philippines of China's claim to the Spratlys, during his meeting with our late Vice-President, concurrently Foreign Affairs Secretary Salvador "Doy" Laurel. This was in the Fujian Room of the Great Hall of the People in 1986, Minister Li had narrated. When this was mentioned, I had to laugh at the coincidence. I was present at that meeting, too, I informed Bert. I had gone to Beijing with Doy Laurel as a member of the Philippine Foreign Policy Council, and we had the late Ambassador Luis Moreno Salcedo along with us, too. At the meeting, during which Deng smoked incessantly, punctuating his remarks while occasionally spitting with admirable accuracy into a spitton beside his left foot, the Chairman had humorously asked: "What do you call our Nansha islands?" Doy blinked and in a stage whisper that could be heard all over the room, asked our group: "Nansha? Saan ba 'yan? (Where's that?) What do we call it?" I mumbled, "Perhaps... I'm not sure, but perhaps it's Admiral Cloma's Freedomland?"
It was Moreno Salcedo, one of our most brilliant and seasoned diplomats, who finally supplied the answer: “Sir, it’s the Kalayaan islands—the Spratlys.” “Mr. Chairman,” Doy boomed, “we call that island group Kalayaan or freedom isles.” “Well,” Deng twinkled back, with a mischievous smile—in Mandarin (putonghwa) characterized by a strong Szechwan accent—"your so-called Kalayaan, which is our Nansha islands belong to us—but we won’t argue about that at this time. We can leave it to another time.” You bet. Well, that’s been one of the bones of contention up to now, even after the sort of cooperation “deal” hatched between GMA and Hu Jintao during her earlier state visit to China.

There’s no doubt that the increasingly powerful People’s Republic of China has been reaching out to us, extending the...uh, hand of friendship, and pledging aid, cooperation, even military assistance (but the figure last mentioned is a joke, really, so minuscule it was in amount). There’s no doubt that it is in our paramount interest to be friends with our proximate and economically-booming neighbor—the former Sleeping Giant of Napoleonic caveat is not only awake but is posting economic gains of over 9 percent per year, and gobbling up all the supplies of oil, coal, and fuel available. However, as one who has been covering China since 1964—interviewed Zhou En-lai, Deng, and many other leaders over the years—I’d be cautious. Deep down, the Chinese nurse a contempt for Filipinos, which sometimes surfaces at the most unexpected moments and in the strangest places. In China, they used to tell us, in pious tones: “Truth is like fire: it cannot be wrapped in paper” (meaning, truth can never be hidden or concealed). Yet, they have always been the most inscrutable people of all, even more inscrutable than the Japanese. We think we understand the Chinese after more than 2,000 years of relationship. Many of us, like me, have some Chinese in our bloodstream. Our taipan and bankers are of Chinese descent. However, when all is said and done, we don’t understand them.

March 8, 2005

This is a true story. Not long ago, an adventurous English traveler ventured into our south seas and found the beautiful island of Cebu. He checked into a quaint hotel in Mactan frequented by expatriates,
finding it charming because of its cozy bar and delicious food. That evening, while enjoying a few bottles of *San Miguel* beer and merrily gossiping with local “ex-pats” and tourists, he and his newly-found friends were joined by another foreigner who had been staying in the same hotel, he said, for the past few days. The newcomer had a very dark complexion, and he explained that he was a refugee from Sri Lanka who had been forced to flee his country owing to political persecution. Finally, the Brit decided he had had enough of *San Mig*, the seductive nectar of the gods (of the brewery), and staggered off to bed in his room, several yards from the bar. Before he nodded off to sleep, to dream about his day on the beach, the traveler took off from his wrist his prized Rolex watch which was a special edition Sea Master used by professional divers, and emptied his trousers of the usual valuables. The following morning, when he awoke, he was shocked to discover that his Rolex watch, his cellphone and wallet with all its contents had disappeared from his bedside table. He immediately rushed out to alert the owner and the local police. After an hour of fruitless search, it was discovered that the fellow from Sri Lanka had also mysteriously disappeared from the hotel. It turned out, after inquiries, that he had caught an early morning flight for Manila.

Our despondent traveler, after filing a complaint in the police station against the suspect, the mysterious Sri Lankan—a process which took a couple of hours, mind you—also departed by plane for Manila. Late that same afternoon, having returned to our chief metropolis, the depressed Brit went to his favorite bar in Ermita, Manila, to drown his sorrows at the bar. After about an hour of observing his steady drinking, the proprietor of the bar approached the traveler, asking him why he was so down in the mouth. The traveler explained to the owner how, only twelve hours earlier, he had been robbed in Cebu. Now he was back in Manila, mourning the thought that he would never again see his watch, credit cards, cellphone, and wallet again. The owner then brought out a watch, and asked the traveler whether he recognized it. To the amazement of the Brit, when he examined it, the watch turned out to be his own Rolex—which he had “lost” in Cebu only twelve hours earlier!

The owner then proceeded to relate to the astonished traveler how a man had come to his bar offering the Rolex for sale. As soon as the owner spotted the Rolex, he realized it was uncannily similar
to the watch sported by his Brit patron. He reminded the traveler that on an earlier occasion, they had previously compared their Rolex watches—and he had not forgotten the Sea Master’s unique features. The owner related that he had been able to convince the eager would-be seller that he (the bar proprietor) would have to take custody of the proffered watch so he could show it to prospective buyers. (He already realized the watch was “hot”). The bar owner then suggested to the irate Brit that they conduct a “sting” operation to entice the Sri Lankan to a meeting in a nearby shopping mall. The police were called in, of course. As soon as the unsuspecting light-fingered Sri Lankan showed up at the meeting place, he was pounced upon by the cops and taken to the bar. When the now cringing Sri Lankan was searched, on his person the irate victim, the policemen and the bar owner found the Brit’s purloined wallet, his credit cards, his cellphone—but not all of his money. The cash had been sadly depleted, but what the heck. What a stroke of fate it had been!

Not every tale of robbery has such a happy ending, of course. But this is as good enough a story to remind us that, sometimes—sometimes, the evil get punished and the good prevail. As for the bar owner, I know him. So I know this story is true. He won’t let me identify him, however, “It’s bad for business,” he winked. Then he offered me a beer on the house. Spotting my timepiece, he cracked: “Max, is that a Rolex you’re wearing?” I immediately stuck my hand back into my pocket.

March 20, 2005

Why don’t we do what the Thais and the Indians do? They always say good things about their country, their prospects (even to the point of being boastful), and their people. They exude optimism, even if there’s only a tiny ray of sunshine in a bleak sky.

Ironically, TIME magazine in its February 29 issue, frontpage headlined “The Science of Happiness,” declared us Filipinos as among the happiest people in the world. In a “viewpoint” article, Alan C. Robles who writes for the South China Morning Post and lectures at the International Institute for Journalism in Berlin, mused: “Despite burdens like poverty and pollution, Filipinos tend to be happy. Why?”
Don’t ask—just feel. And I wish we’d express this in speech more often, instead of the down-in-the-mouth reporting we daily dish out both in conversation and in our media. (Journalists, for that matter, seem to bad-mouth each other with special venom).

Robles revealed in TIME that The World Values Survey published by the University of Michigan last November “ranked 88 countries and territories according to feelings of ‘subjective well-being’—which combined its happiness and ‘life-satisfaction’ scores—and the Philippines had one of the highest ratings in Asia . . .” It was disclosed that the Philippines’ ratings were “above far richer locations such as Taiwan, Japan and South Korea.” Robles added that “a few years back, a Hong Kong ad agency found the Philippines to be the happiest place among a group that included Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong and mainland China.”

Robles pointed out that “we Filipinos live in a country mired in poverty, political conflict, corruption and environmental destruction. On top of that, the Philippines is so regularly battered by typhoons, earthquakes, landslides, floods, volcanic eruptions, and other natural catastrophes that it’s been ranked the world’s most disaster-prone nation by the Brussels-based Center for Research and Epidemiology of Disasters. Yet last Christmas, toward the close of a particularly wretched year, eight out of 10 respondents told a local research firm that they felt ‘optimistic’ about 2005. No tropical depression here, folks.” This article has been quoted before. I know. But it needs repeating.

I particularly like the fact that the “feel-good” World Values Survey report, which ranked this country one of the highest in happiness ratings among 88 countries and territories worldwide, came from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. When I was enrolled there, in the English Language Institute (our dormitory was Taylor House, South Quad), we had an excellent campus newspaper going, The Michigan Daily. You could step off any sidewalk without fear of being run down by a speeding car or truck. If you walked on the “zebra” line, every vehicle—in those days—would politely stop to allow you to cross.

The laid-back, courteous pace of life in the Ann Arbor of that era was in sharp contrast to my subsequent studies in New York City. There, every car, bus, or vehicle seemed determined to run every crossing pedestrian down. We had in Michigan the best marching band, and our football “cheering” song was Hail to the Victors Valiant,
but, alas, we frequently lost in football to Michigan State University in East Lansing.

My most unforgettable experience then was when I ran for the presidency of the foreign “scholarship” students association. The Commonwealth bloc of students ganged up on me—from Britain and all the former British Empire (Commonwealth) countries, because my opponent was an Indian. Fortunately, my roommate was a German student from Dusseldorf, so I got the German students’ vote. Then the Japanese students voted for me, so I could say I got the “Axis” vote. Finally, when I stood up for my campaign spiel, I recited our hero, Dr. Jose Rizal’s Mi Ultimo Adios (My Last Farewell—before his execution by the Spaniards) from the first stanza to the last verse. All the Central and South American students leaped to their feet and shouted, “Arriba!” The Spanish students, too, cried out, “Viva, Hermano!” They all voted for me.

Looking back on it, I can only say: How wonderful it is to be a Filipino. Our uniqueness comes from our Malay race, our intermingling with the Chinese, our Spanish heritage, our American period—and the occasional guilt the Japanese feel about having occupied and tyrannized us (if they even know about it). We may be crazy, mixed-up kids—but it’s the “mix” which makes us strong.

March 30, 2005

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Yesterday, the entire world seemed to have stayed glued to television sets, or switching them on and off from time to time—checking on the “death watch” on the Holy Father, Karol Wojtyla, known by the 1.1 billion Roman Catholics around this planet as Pope John Paul II. There was no longer any doubt the Pope was dying. The only question that remained, was when. Already it was being announced that at a conclave held by the 117 Cardinals, his successor would be chosen within 15 to 20 days after his death. The 264th successor to the Chair of St. Peter, the Vicar of Christ, who had erupted on the world’s stage as an athletic, Broadway-charming Pontiff in 1978—the first non-Italian Pope in 455 years, a Polish prelate from a then Communist country—ended his reign so weak, and so pitifully frail that when he tried to give his urbi et
orbi Easter blessing, no words could issue from his throat, try mightily as he did. In silence then, did the most outspoken Supreme Pontiff in history, slide toward the conclusion of his colorful, morally steadfast Papacy.

There are already millions of words being written or uttered about him, but perhaps I can turn back the clock to give you a glimpse of what Pope John Paul II used to be at the high noon of his Papacy. This is what I wrote in January 1983, at the time the Holy Father had declared 1983 a “Holy Year” commemorating the 1,950th anniversary of our Redemption by Jesus Christ.

In December 1982, a few days after he had made the announcement, this writer got an invitation to a “special audience” with the Holy Father in the “Sala Nervi”, that impressive astrodome completed by a famous Italian architect a year or two before the present occupant of the Chair of Peter became Pope in October 1978.

Now, I've had special audiences with Popes before—with the marvelously human John XXIII (who broke out in hiccups five or six times) in the Sistine Chapel and with Paul VI at his summer residence at Castelgandolfo in September 1970. Pope Paul was in a hurry to get rid of us since there were other people waiting, so he gave my wife a rosary and gave me a rosary and blessed us. Then I mentioned that I had three children who were also praying for him. So he motioned to his secretary, an Irish priest with twinkling eyes, got three holy medals for him, and blessed our three children in absentia. I said that the Filipino people were praying for him also, and he got three stampitas from his assistant, and said I should give them to my children too. Then he blessed the Filipino people. I made as if to open my mouth to say something else, but catching the apprehensive look in his eye, I simply bent over to kiss his ring. He fervently blessed us both again, obviously grateful for our imminent departure.

A “special audience” with John Paul II, that Polish superstar originally known as Karol Wojtyla, is something else. It is orchestrated like a Broadway show—with lights, camera, action. Special audiences are given every Wednesday to a cast of hundreds, including scores of giggling and twittering nuns who jump up and down in excitement like teenager groupies at the prospect of shaking hands with the Holy Father or being favored with his smile. One must be careful not to be trampled by those enthusiastic Sisters who go into paroxysms of delight at the appearance of this Pontiff who exudes charm and charisma.
Exactly at the stroke of 11 a.m., he strides into the vast hall to the joyous and resounding peal of an organ. The crowd of laymen and women, priests and nuns from three continents simply goes wild. People jostle each other for a glimpse of Pope John Paul. They put out their hands to him. His progress from entrance door to his throne on the high dais beneath a fantastic Nervi sculptural frieze of the Resurrected Christ floating amidst clouds of glory is a triumph. He shakes hands like a politician at the hustings, pressing the flesh, kissing babies, his fingers constantly being grabbed at by the Faithful (there's no other word to describe them) who smother his ring with loyal kisses in transports of happiness little short of levitation.

Halfway down the aisle—a slow pilgrim's progress since he stops at every group of persons to bless bowed heads and shake hands—the Pope breaks up the audience by clowning. He calls for a chair from his aides, steps on it, and waves at everybody. When the crowd applauds, he motions like a conductor to synchronize the handclaps. He looks tired (the would-be assassin's bullets in St. Peter's square have taken their toll on him) but he also looks like he is enjoying himself. No Pope in the past has ever understood or harnessed the power of "personal contact" with the Church Militant as effectively as this Pontiff.

On the left side of the auditorium is the usual delegation from his native Poland, composed of blonde girls charmingly attired in their native costume with flowers around each fair brow, men in sombre dark suits and women holding up children. The group is waving a banner that reads, in Polish: "We're from Krakow". Krakow is where the Holy Father studied for the priesthood, even while the occupying Nazis had a dragnet out for him and his colleagues. As he nears them, the Poles break into their National Anthem and then the hymn "May You Live a Hundred Years." Most of them raise their fingers defiantly in the "Solidarity" sign. Tears of pride and sorrow shine on each Polish face. Even the Romans—who at times show irritation at this constant Polish "invasion" and the weekly attempt of visiting Poles to "preempt" their Pope—are touched. They sheepishly and furtively wipe a tear or two from the corner of an eye.

When the Holy Father reaches his "throne", with a gaggle of Cardinals in complexions ranging from pink to mahogany resplendent in two rows at one side, he begins to speak Italian. There is no question as he shifts from Latin to French to German and to English that he is the Pontiff of the whole Catholic Church—770 million strong around the globe.
He does not attempt to say anything in Filipino, Chinese or Japanese—except at New Year's when he gives his blessing from the Vatican which is broadcast by satellite all over the world.

He talks of 1983 being a "Holy Year" and calls for prayers (not swords) around the Cross. The Soviet Union's Joseph Stalin, during World War II, once cynically asked of the Pope: "How many Divisions has he?" Karol Wojtyla shows himself a man and leader capable of rallying many Divisions.

The paragraphs above were published, if I may repeat, in January 1983. And that's how I hope and pray we will always remember Papa Wojtyla, the first Shepherd who jetted to his flock, not once or twice but more than 100 times, instead of locking himself up in the Vatican as almost all of his predecessors had done.

The only other Pope who had gone out was the late Pope Paul VI, who caused a global furor in October 1965 by flying to New York on a 24-hour visit to the United Nations and to then US President Lyndon B. Johnson. This had made Pope Paul VI the first Pope to set foot outside Italy since the French ruler, Napoleon Bonaparte, had dragged Pius VII off to Paris in 1812, not to crown him (Nap seized the Crown and placed it on his own head) but to merely, perforce sanctify his Imperial Reign with a blessing. Pope Paul VI did make another trip, one to the Philippines (27–29 November 1970). The Holy Father had wished to honor our country as the only Catholic country in Asia. His visit, indeed, was memorable but in a manner never intended. No sooner had the Pope descended the ramp of his aircraft at the Manila International Airport and begun the ritual of the kissing of the ring and the shaking of hands than one demented Bolivian painter named Benjamín Mendoza broke through the crowd and hurled himself at the Holy Father, brandishing a knife and shouting: "Death to superstition!" Somebody's timely karate chop saved the Supreme Pontiff from harm and the Filipino nation from both tearful mourning and infinite embarrassment. However, screaming headlines all over the globe trumpeted the enormity of the shocking event and, in the resulting confusion and excitement, the world's readers somehow overlooked the fact that the assailant had been a Bolivian and not a Pinoy. All ended happily—by gosh, even for that crackpot Mendoza. He was slapped in jail but, ironically, his bizarre paintings, which had never been saleable, suddenly became a hot item in various art dealers' shops in New York and Manila.
When Pope John Paul II himself visited Manila, he was joyously greeted by three million people! Now, he is going . . . By the time these words appear, who knows, he may even be gone. However, he will never be forgotten. I disagreed—but who am I?—with many dicta laid down by Papa Wojtyla. He had a warm smile, a workman’s hands, but a heart of bedrock conservatism. Yet, he stood fast by his spiritual moorings. In a world of increasing compromises, he refused to compromise. Jesus had said to Simon-Peter in parting that he (Peter) was going to be The Rock. And on this Rock, Our Lord had vowed, “I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” Go with God, then, Holy Father. You, too, were The Rock. And the materialistic, vain, and cynical world, or sinners like me, did not prevail.

April 3, 2005

And so a saintly Pontiff, Pope John Paul II, has finally gone to heaven. There has been a torrent of nonstop praise for him and his vigorous, controversial Papacy, on the airwaves and in print media. It will be long before debate reemerges over his more stubborn and conservative views, because he was a great, dynamic, prayerful, and wonderful man.

What will follow now is the election of a new Pope. The “Conclave” of Cardinals, some 117 of them, will meet 15 to 20 days after the Holy Father’s demise. (Cardinals who are 80 years old and over are no longer allowed to “vote”). I’ve read a number of books on the election of Popes, and other volumes not so complimentary of the Papacy, but I believe the best explanatory volume is that of Michael Walsh, a prominent Catholic author and historian, a former Jesuit. Walsh is the archivist for the Heythrop College of London University and writes a column for the international Catholic publication, The Tablet. In his book, The Conclave subtitled, A Sometimes Secret and Occasionally Bloody History of Papal Elections (Sheed and Ward, London, Chicago, New York, Toronto, Oxford, 2003), Walsh has a final chapter captioned, How to Spot a Pope. Unlike in previous Papal elections, when Cardinals summoned to Rome to elect a new Pontiff hardly knew each other, Walsh observes, this time the members of the College of Cardinals,
thanks to John Paul II having frequently called general meetings of the men who wore Red Hats during his reign, are more or less well acquainted with one another.

"There are over fifty countries that boast at least one cardinal," the author records. "The largest number from a single country is still Italy, but the United States is running it close. The continent with the largest number is still Europe, but again, the Americans both North and South look to be catching up." The Philippines has three Cardinals. Will the Conclave choose a new Pope quickly? Will it be a non-Italian again, following our late Polish Pope, formerly Karol Wojtyla of Krakow? Or will the Italians, who exclusively held it for 450 years, "recapture" the Papacy? We must recall that before Karol Wojtyla, the Archbishop of Krakow (also spelled Cracow) was elected on the eighth ballot on 16 October 1978, it seemed that an Italian, Cardinal Benelli, might be anointed. Other early contenders were Cardinal Siri, and two non-Italians, the archbishops of Karachi in Pakistan and Fortaleza in Brazil. Who can tell whom the Holy Spirit—or the spirit of Vatican “politics” selects? It will sound sacrilegious to make the latter observation. Yet, those who have studied the history of the Papacy, from the time of St. Peter, cannot deny the facts of life.

Walsh himself leads off with the following quotation from Jeffrey Richards’s book, The Popes and the Papacy in the Early Middle Ages. The historian Richards, it must be noted, referred to the “shenanigans of papal history between the end of the fifth century and the middle of the eighth. Later history is no less suspicious and at times disillusioning.” Wrote Richards:

Nowhere is the blend of political, religious and social elements more apparent than in the papal elections. In their intensity and passion, they matched, and in some cases even surpassed, the turbulence surrounding imperial elections. Many papal elections involved violence, chicanery and corruption on a grand scale. Blood ran in the streets of Rome, gold changed hands in the corridors of power, rival factions pumped out propaganda and ambitious men caballed around the deathbeds of the popes. The high passions and low intrigues that this involved have a familiar, almost contemporary ring. The fire and spice of those times comes through to us in the surviving documents of
the period. This is the raw red meat of papal history, this is not the desiccated, pre-packed portions often served up in the guise of papal history.

The Vatican’s defenders at times attempt to dismiss such tomes as tracts penned by disciples of the anti-Christ or whatever Demon, but history is inexorable. “Pope,” as writers remind us, simply means “father”—derived from the Greek “papas” and in Greece “papas” is still invoked to address parish priests. In choosing a Pope, a Papal decree of 1059 restricted voting rights to “cardinal bishops.”

It was Gregory X who called a general council of the Church in Lyons, France, on 7 May 1274, and the resulting decree was published on 1 November 1274, a long document, entitled Urbi periculum (“Where there is danger”). The “danger” lay in having a long vacancy in the Papacy. This decree provided for the Cardinals to be virtually locked up until they “produced” a Pope, virtually restricting them to only one dish at lunch and supper, then “only bread, wine and water” if five days had elapsed without their electing a new Pontiff. Gregory’s successor, however, did not last long. After Pope Gregory died at Arezzo on 10 January 1276, the “Conclave” elected, after 11 days, on first ballot, the French cardinal Pierre of Tarentaise. He took the name Innocent V, but he was pope for only half a year. He died after merely six months on 22 June 1276. This time, the Conclave met in Rome and elected Ottobono Fieschi—under pressure by the ruler, Charles of Anjou, a senator of the city—and the new pope took the title of Hadrian V. His pontificate, though, lasted just over a month, only a week or so longer than it had taken to elect him!

What complicated matters was that Hadrian V had died in the summer palace of Viterbo, only some miles away where he had gone to escape the oppressive heat of Roman summer—so, under the rules, the Conclave would now be held in Viterbo. The Cardinals chose Cardinal Peter of Spain (he came, in fact, from Lisbon, Portugal). Peter chose the title, John XXI although, Walsh pointed out, “there had never been a John XX.” The new Holy Father, a medical researcher, was determined to continue his research, and built a study behind his papal palace in Viterbo. Like the Marcos-time Film Center, designed by Imelda, it had been built in a hurry. The roof fell in on Pope John
XXI's head, and he died a few days after the accident. He had been pope only nine months. Becoming pope is, indeed, not a guarantee of long life. The most bizarre example of this we experienced in modern times. After Pope Paul VI died in the papal summer residence of Castel Gandolfo in August 1978, the Conclave elected the Patriarch of Venice, Albino Luciani, 65. He chose the title of John Paul. He had been elected on the fourth ballot, in the shortest Conclave on record. It was also a short papacy. As Walsh put it, "Thirty-three days later he was dead of a heart attack. The Vatican handled the news so badly (they thought it improper that the Pope's corpse should have been discovered by a nun and tried to disguise this fact) that conspiracy theories became commonplace . . ." Was Pope John Paul murdered, or did he succumb to a heart attack? The suspicion lingers, but Walsh dismisses this idea. I can't tell you who will be the next Pope—nobody can. But, at least, you now have some idea of how he will be chosen.

April 4, 2005

TAIPEI, Taiwan—Getting to Taipei from Manila is a breeze. You board a jet at our airport, NAIA-1 and in two hours you're stepping off into the streamlined Chiang Kai-shek International Airport. Since my last visit here was twelve years ago (light years before "Meteor Garden"), I'm not surprised that this bustling air terminal was modernized three years ago.

In the old days, when I used to fly in and out of Taipei much more frequently, tough airport Customs officers and policemen would go through every item in your luggage when you arrived, and again go through the same rigid procedure of checking when you departed. Yesterday, they just smilingly waved us through. This does not mean, of course, that the 23 million Taiwanese (yes, that's how few, but rich, they are) are in a state of relaxation. They're keeping a wary eye on the mainland, 100 miles away across the Taiwan Strait, where the People's Liberation Army and the Navy are building up. The leadership in Beijing, while its top brass are on a charm offensive in other capitals of the region—even China's President Hu Jintao is coming to Manila (April 23,
I think), and Premier Wen Jiabao has just been making friendly deals in India—are threatening Taiwan with massive attack and invasion IF Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian and his even more high-profile, articulate Vice-President Annette Lu dare declare their tight little island an “independent” Taiwan. The Communist government’s parliament in Beijing last March 16 formalized this threat by unanimously passing an Anti-Secession Law which literally gives the more than two million strong PLA—Army, Navy and Air Force—a blank check to attack Taiwan. The new law authorizes the mainland’s military to utilize “non-peaceful means and other necessary measures to protect the nation’s sovereignty and territorial integrity” should “the Taiwan independence secessionist forces act under any name or by any means to cause the fact of Taiwan’s secession from China...” and so forth.

China’s President Hu Jintao was quite specific in a statement the previous day: “We shall step up preparations for possible military struggle and enhance our capabilities to cope with crises, safeguard peace, prevent wars, and win wars if any.” How can anybody doubt Beijing’s growing ability to become the neighborhood bully? Even Japan’s military (euphemistically still called Self-Defense Forces) are increasingly worried and anti-Japanese riots have been rocking Beijing, Guangzhou (Canton) and Shenzen, showing that China, with a booming economy and a burgeoning appetite for imports of oil and materials needed to keep its factories going, is ready to assert itself as a power not only in Asia but in the world. It’s uncanny. In the same manner Imperial Japan in the 1930s to 1940s felt compelled to seize territory and control the seas in the region to assure itself of oil, food, raw materials and the “lifeblood” to keep going, the People’s Republic of China is beginning to think along similar lines — otherwise it won’t be able to maintain its spectacular growth rate of 8.7 percent per annum.

Has history come full cycle? How does this development concern us? Or threaten us? One thing is sure. Here is this writer in vulnerable Taipei—a metropolis of six million (three million living in the city proper, another three million in the metropolitan region within a radius of 30 km). The airport is 42 kilometers away, a ride over a smooth expressway of 45 minutes. The hostile mainlanders have been warning that if the leaders in Taipei misbehave, they’ll unleash the 700 missiles zeroed in on Taiwan from their end. The missiles located in China’s southeastern coast, in Fujian for example, are beefed up by an additional 70 to 75 missiles a
year. Well, I hope till I get out of here a few days from now, nobody on the mainland with an itchy trigger, uh, missile-finger, will set any of them off.

Decades ago, as a more energetic journalist, I flew aboard a military C-47 to the outpost islands of Kinmen (Quemoy) and Matsu, from which you could see the Fujian (Fookien) coast. Our aircraft flew low, almost at wave level to avoid detection by mainland radar. We chose the "odd day" because, unless my recollection is wrong, the Red Chinese—as we used to call them before we got buddy-buddy with Beijing—shelled those fortified little isles every "even" day—in short, every other day.

Cannon shells are, naturally, to be feared. (We fortified our spirits when on Quemoy by drinking bottles of potent Kaoliang wine). However, a missile is something else—it blows up your entire island. And this symbolizes the increasingly fearsome power of the fast-expanding People's Liberation Army. According to published reports, a China versus Taiwan battle would be a terrible mismatch. Taiwan has an Army of only 200,000 men, a Navy of 45,000 (15,000 of them Marines), four submarines, 11 destroyers, 21 frigates, 59 missile craft and an Air Force of 45,000 manning 479 combat aircraft. Taiwan, on the other hand, plane for plane has the most modern, computerized air force in the region.

In sharp contrast, China has an Army of 1.6 million, a Navy of 255,000 (counting 10,000 marines and 26,000 naval aviation complement), with 69 submarines, 21 destroyers, 42 frigates, 96 missile craft, and an Air Force of 400,000 men with 1,900 combat aircraft. Most of their military aircraft are obviously obsolescent, but Beijing has been streamlining swiftly, with Russian Sukhoi Su-27s (fighters) and Sukhoi Su-30s. The Chinese, with the vast wealth they've accumulated in the past decade, have been buying weapons from the former Soviet "superpower" arsenal like eager kids let loose in a candy store. But they're not kids. They're Chinese with a resentful memory of having been pushed around in the Opium Wars by the Brits, suffered Western dominance and arrogance, and having been bloodied by Japan. The Rape of Nanjing by the brilliant young American historian Iris Chang—who surprisingly committed suicide a few months ago—remains a runaway bestseller in translation. If the rulers in Beijing want to resurrect the hegemony of the Middle Kingdom, whose civilization they point out, dates back 5,000 years, then we all ought to take note—and react accordingly. I already know how we'll react in Manila. We'll probably kowtow. That's an old Chinese word, which means grovel before a master. On the other hand we may surprise
ourselves, if ever push comes to shove. We might develop backbone instead of jawbone. We might even be able to combat the Islamic terrorists who're rampaging in Mindanao and keeping us in Metro Manila, Luzon and the Visayas on our uneasy toes.

April 13, 2005

TAIPEI, Taiwan—Meeting with this writer in the President's Office in downtown Taipei, Taiwan's outspoken and articulate Vice President Ms. Lu Hsiu-lien, better known abroad as Annette Lu, deplored what she called the “myth” of the “One China” policy, asserting the injustice involved in the attempt “to force Taiwan into the arms of the People's Republic of China.” Appearing very chic in her two-piece beige suit, Vice-President Lu emphasized what she had just said which, of course, for about five years now has provoked consternation and outrage in Beijing. “Taiwan is not a part of China, but has been sovereign for many years.” “Human society,” she continued, “should not be governed by the rules of the jungle, where the strong prey upon the weak to survive. In the cross-strait relationship, the PRC (China) is like a lion and Taiwan a little kitty cat. Throwing the kitty cat to the lion would no doubt result in a bloody end for the kitty cat and a small meal for the lion.” Additionally, she said, “if the world is to exist in peace, the large and ferocious beasts (obviously referring to China) must be kept in their cages, living their own lives as tame and cute animals play freely, with the birds in the sky, and the bunnies and kitty cats playing with one another. The sleeping lion, however, has awakened; the international community must work as one to tame it, for the sake of peace and stability in Asia.” “Let Taiwan be Taiwan!” Lu concluded emphatically, “We don't belong to China!”

Beijing, in contrast, insists that Taiwan is “a breakaway province of China.” I remember that when I interviewed Premier Zhou En-lai in Beijing's “Great Hall of the People” in October 1964, he said to me that the “Fujian” (Fookien) room had deliberately been selected by him to serve as the locus of our meeting, “to remind you that Taiwan is a sub-province of Fujian!” Then in 1986 the subject once again came up in my conversation with the late Chairman Deng Xiaopeng in that same Fujian Room of the Great Hall. Wondering out loud even as he chain-smoked
why Taiwan seemed not to be willing to accept "[his] formula," which had been readily adopted by Hong Kong, he went on to speak of a similar "one country, two systems" offer to Taiwan, guaranteeing fifty additional years of capitalism, following "its return to China."

The Taipei Government could, of course, be experiencing a perception problem, owing to its own semantics. For one thing, in the time of its "founding father," the late Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, it had called itself (and said so, on all of its passports), the Republic of China, or the ROC.

A little history would not hurt here. Following a briefly fought war over the islands, the Qing (Ching) dynasty of China ceded Taiwan to Japan in the Treaty of Simonoseki, of 1895. The Japanese modernized Taiwan, giving it its major infrastructure. But then they also insisted that the Taiwanese adopt Japanese names, so they could become proper Japanese subjects, susceptible to the military draft in relation to the Japanese Imperial Army. Indeed, a brother of Taiwan's former President, Lee Teng-hui, died in the Philippines fighting the Americans. The Japanese invasion of the Philippines in December 1941, accompanied by bombings in Manila and Clark Field, had in fact been mounted from Taiwan. On 25 October 1945, in the aftermath of Japan's surrender to the United States, the Allied Powers made the decision to allow Gen. Chiang Kai-shek, the Nationalist Chinese leader, to temporarily govern China, from Taiwan. Taiwan had, at the time, a population of 6.7 million. 285,000 Japanese civilians, as well as 158,000 Japanese military personnel, were "evicted," repatriated to Japan. Chiang Kai-shek installed in various places in the government 12,000 Nationalist Chinese military personnel, and 200 civilian officials. Native Taiwanese resented and resisted what they believed was the nationalist Chinese' heavy-handed methods, their "mainland" rules. This resulted in their suppression, through paroxysms of violence that claimed 28,000 lives, and the incarceration of thousands more. In 1949 when he lost the Mainland to attacking Communists led by Mao Zedong, Chiang fled to Taiwan, bringing with him his Nationalist government, and whomsoever among his troops was willing to follow. Buttressed by his own Kuomintang (KMT), he ruled Taiwan with an iron fist until his death in 1975. The KMT had for decades fully expected to simply regroup in Taiwan and then return in force to "liberate" the Mainland from the Communists. A number of the "mainlanders" I got to know there when I visited in 1959 still kept in their pockets keys
to their apartments in Shanghai, or their homes in Beijing and other cities—hoping soon to be able to reinvade the Mainland and “recover” their lost homes and properties. Those dreams have mostly faded under the overlay of years.

To this day a subtle “divide” exists between the native Taiwanese and these erstwhile Mainlanders, who had dominated the government for a half a century! Some 85 percent of the people take themselves to be native Taiwanese, the benshengren or “province people,” who speak the local Taiwanese dialect even if Mandarin, or Putonghua, is their official language. On the other hand, those who in 1949 followed Chiang Kai-shek to the island are, along with their descendants, classified as daluren or Mainlanders. In point of fact, however, of Taiwan’s eleven officially acknowledged tribes, only the aborigines, the yuanjhumin, could ever refer to themselves as the island’s “original” inhabitants. They unfortunately constitute no more than 1.5 percent of the island’s total population.

Vice-President Lu is a native Taiwanese born into a hard-luck family on June 6, 1944, in the northern city of Taoyuan. Her hard-working parents had twice considered giving her up for adoption, but could not in the end bear the thought of parting with their daughter, who had made them proud excelling in her studies. Lu recalls that her mother would travel tirelessly all around Taiwan to assist her father in their family business, prefiguring the fact that, today, “there is not a single woman in our family who is not doing the work of men.” She rejects what she calls the myth of “maintaining the status quo” with Mainland China. The real status quo is that “Taiwan is a de facto independent nation, whether or not it is recognized, and despite the confusion of its official title.” She condemns the antisecession law unanimously adopted just last March by China’s parliament, recalling to mind the protests against it mounted in Taipei a few weeks back by more than a million Taiwanese. When Japan surrendered “unconditionally,” she points out, Taiwan did not automatically revert to China because “we had been ceded by China in 1895.” In fact, there is no mention, in the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951, of Taiwan reverting to China in the aftermath of Japan’s surrender of its control of the island.

The second myth peddled by the PRC that Ms. Lu rejects is its claim that the cross-strait issue was resolved with finality by United Nations Resolution 2758, adopted in 1971. “This is a blatant lie.” The resolution merely states “that the representatives of the Government of the People’s
Republic of China are the only lawful representatives of China to the United Nations,” and that, therefore, “the representatives of Chiang Kai-shek” are asked to vacate “the place they unlawfully occupied at the United Nations, i.e. as representatives of China.” Vice-President Lu further reminded me that the plain text of that Resolution does not support any claim that Taiwan is part of China, “or that the PRC shall have claim to Taiwan.” Unfortunately, she complained, the world has allowed itself to be misled by the PRC’s false claims, “without delving deeper for the truth.” Needless to say, Lu is reviled in Beijing for her fearless candor and pugnacity. She told this writer: “There is no need for Taiwan to declare independence as Beijing keeps warning against. Taiwan has been independent and sovereign for many years already!” That is something China’s President Hu Jintao might have something to say about during his state visit to Manila on 22 April, immediately following the Asian-African Summit in Bandung, Indonesia.

In any event, Annette Lu is one very tough lady. She spent many years in prison, brokered by the then-ruling KMT government. This brings us all the way back to “The Kaosiung Incident” of December 1979, which Ms. Lu had helped to organize. The rally, to celebrate Human Rights Day, had been sponsored by the editors of Meiilidao (Beautiful Magazine), a liberal publication critical of the government. Simply for handing out to passersby fliers announcing the rally, two of its organizers were badly mauled. Additionally, the routes leading to the rally site, as well as the site itself, were barricaded by the police, forcing thousands of its erstwhile participants to take to the streets, where violent scuffles between the rallyists and the cops broke out. Eight of its organizers were put under arrest, including Annette Lu, who had delivered a 20-minute speech at the blocked-off rally scene. Mr. Chen Shui-ban acted as the lawyer in their own defense, although to little avail, since a prison term of about twelve years still ended up being meted out upon each of them, for their alleged sedition. She had already served five years and four months of her prison term when the persistent efforts both of her friends and of Amnesty International resulted in her release, ostensibly “for the treatment of thyroid carcinoma.”(This reminds you of Ninoy Aquino’s “release” by the Marcos dictatorship so he could undergo a heart-bypass in Texas).

As much as the years Ms. Lu spent in prison have taken a toll on her, she remains a person of formidable energy. Between her release in March of 1985 and 1990 she traveled extensively around the U.S. and
Europe, lecturing boldly and confidently on Taiwan, her favorite subject. On scholarship at Harvard in the U.S., she finished two Masters’ degrees, and acquired fluency and eloquence operating in an increasingly English-speaking world. In the year 2000, following fifty-five uninterrupted years of political hegemony, the Kuomintang (KMT) fared badly at the polls, losing to Mr. Chen’s and Ms. Lu’s proindependence Democratic Progressive Party. The two were wounded, although not seriously hurt, in an attempt on their lives last year. They won their second four-year term on the rebound. Chen is featured on p. 48 of TIME 100 (April 18), subtitled, “The Lives and Ideas of the World’s 100 Most Influential People,” in a suggestive article titled, “Taking it to the Brink.” Upon maxing out his second (current) term as president, under Taiwanese law, Chen will not be eligible for reelection. Will Ms. Lu seek to fill the breach? Who knows?

April 17, 2005

Some friends have asked me why I consider the small scatter of islands to our north, namely Taiwan (their main island), Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu, so important to the Philippines. My reply is plain enough. From our northernmost islands, indeed Northern Luzon itself, you almost see with the naked eye the southernmost tip of Taiwan, also known to history as “Formosa.” This is why it’s vital for us to know whether Taiwan will remain independent, despite our kowtowing to Beijing and paying diplomatic lip-service to a “One China” policy—just as, by the way, the United States and most of our friends in the United Nations do—which mandates that eventually a reluctant, even defiant Taiwan, may be gobbled up by the People’s Republic of China.

On Friday, 15 April, I flew from Taipei down to Kaohsiung in the south to address the 1,400 cadets of the historic Whampoa Military Academy. The cadets who train to be their country’s officer corps have a spacious campus of 234 hectares, including a beautiful man-made lake, and their war games are geared to a defense of their nation of 23 million against Chinese invasion from the mainland. Just as in the Philippine Military Academy, my host, Superintendent Lt. Gen. John Young, introduced me to their faculty, toured me through their
campus and their museum buildings, one exhibition hall including a completely accurate life-sized fully uniformed wax diorama of the Japanese surrender. Then we went to the giant Mess Hall for lunch, after which I addressed the assembled Corps of Cadets. My translator must have been good, or else they had been briefed to be extremely polite, because they gave me a standing ovation.

What is significant about the Whampoa Military Academy is that it was relocated to Fengshan in Taiwan only on 1 March 1950, a few months after its first Superintendent, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalist Forces retreated from the mainland to Taiwan, leaving it to the Communist People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in 1949. The Academy was really founded by Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the Father of Modern China, whose revolution freed China from the last Emperor of the Manchus. When he opened classes at Whampoa on 16 June 1924, Dr. Sun Yat-sen entrusted it to Chiang Kai-shek as its first Superintendent. The first seven classes were graduated in Canton (Guangzhou), then the Academy was moved to Nanjing, later Chengtu, and finally to Fengshan (Taiwan). Its graduates fought the warlords, then the Japanese, then each other. While most of them remained loyal to Chiang and his Kuomintang, others like Zhou Enlai, went on to lead the Communist Party and the PLA forces.

In any event, I reminded the Whampoa cadets that Filipinos had fought their forebears, too—since Taiwan (Formosa) was under Japanese rule when the Pacific War broke out, and was indeed literally a province of Japan. Hundreds of thousands of Taiwanese were enrolled in the Japanese Imperial Army and Navy. It was from Taiwan that, in December 1941, the Japanese launched their assault on the Philippines. Five hundred Japanese bombers and fighters were assigned on 8 December 1941, to attack US bases in Luzon. Takeoff from various Taiwanese (Formosa) airfields was set for two hours before dawn. In the west were the airfields of the Imperial Japanese Navy’s long-range, land-based 11th Air Fleet, and in the east were the Japanese Army’s Fifth Air Group under the 14th Army. The Army’s planes first hit Baguio City and other northern targets at 9:25 a.m. while the Navy’s planes afterwards struck Clark Field and Iba, Zambales, where the American radar setup was located.

Mind you, this was on the same day as Pearl Harbor, since December 8 in the Philippines is December 7 in Hawaii and the continental
USA. In his book, *MacArthur and Defeat in the Philippines*, Richard Connaughton puts it dramatically: "While the Japanese naval pilots impatiently bided their time at Tainan airbase, Formosa, a voice over the loudspeaker pierced the thick mist: 'At 0600 this morning, a Japanese task force succeeded in carrying out a devastating surprise attack against the American forces in the Hawaiian Islands.' Pandemonium broke out as ecstatic pilots danced in the gloom around their grounded aircraft..." Fog had delayed their take-off, but at 10:45 a.m. the strike force of fifty-three bombers and forty-five Zero fighters took to the sky and set off for Clark Field. Saburo Sakai, later to become famous as one of Japan's top aces of the war, arrived with his squadron of Zeros in advance of the bombers. He subsequently described his wonder: "The sight which met our eyes was unbelievable. Instead of encountering a swarm of American fighters diving at us in attack we looked down and saw some sixty enemy bombers and fighters neatly parked along the airfield runways... the Americans had made no attempt to disperse the planes and increase their safety."

The Japanese bombers arrived in waves of twenty-seven each to finish off the US aircraft on the ground. The thirty-four Zeros completed the job by repeatedly strafing the airfield for over an hour. It was in shambles. More than half of the new B-17s, which had just flown in from the US, were scattered about in thousands of pieces. MacArthur had lost most of his air force—in just one blow. From Taiwan, mind you. When the invasion came two weeks later, the main landing force (also from Taiwan) waded ashore at Lingayen Gulf, 100 miles north of Manila—a complement of 43,000 men. A secondary landing was made the following day, in the south. Their goal was to trap MacArthur's army by hitting him from north and south.

In sum, geography continues to bind our fortunes intimately with those of Taiwan. Our archipelago lies 5,000 miles from Pearl Harbor, and 7,000 miles from San Francisco, USA. We are 1,800 miles from Tokyo. But from Taiwan we are only a few miles. By jet plane, we are merely just an hour and a half away. Need we say more?

April 25, 2005

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BUDHI 2 & 3 ~ 2007
NEW YORK—Believe me, I didn't want to come to the United States of America. I'd heard all the tales about bad things happening to good people at US ports of entry, like airports—coming and leaving. But my wife and I just had to visit our daughter Rachelle who had recently undergone serious surgery for cancer. A very experienced nurse who'd studied in the U.S., taken her Board in Atlantic City, and had worked for years in St. Barnabas, she had been "ambushed" by an aggressive type of cancer, which is life-threatening. Anyway, we found her cheerfully bearing up, driving a car, getting the kids off to school where they all have "A" grades, Arielle 11, Gabrielle 9, and Janelle 7. Her husband, Robert—a Cuban-American born in New York, huge, handsome and supportive, is a supervisor at the big Jersey piers. We used the excuse of a three-day conference in Washington, DC to prod us into breaking into an altogether crowded schedule and hieing off to New Jersey where they live.

What had annoyed me when planning the trip were anecdotes and warnings from friends and acquaintances quoting their own ordeals, or what they had "heard" from others about American Customs, Immigration and Homeland Security becoming increasingly paranoid, pulling people off the line for Guantanamo-Bay-type interrogation, luggage being thoroughly searched—broken into if "locked," Pinoys being subjected to insults and intense grilling, fingerprinted "like criminals," and the like. All the gripes of counterparanoia, ruffled feathers, and affronted amor propio.

Not having been to America in two years, I was ready to believe all that. Indeed, last September having just arrived from Jakarta where I witnessed the carnage of the September 11 bombing of the Australian Embassy in the Indonesian capital (I had arrived only the day before to attend the birthday of now Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono), I even cancelled a speaking engagement in Los Angeles when I learned Homeland Security chief Tom Ridge had declared a "state of alert" in LAX (Los Angeles international airport). Didn't want to reinforce the impression, I guess, that bombs exploded when Soliven arrived.

This time, we were warned: "Don't lock your suitcases. They'll break into them when you get to the US if x-ray glimpses anything suspicious! They'll think you're acting fishy and pull you aside for Third Degree
treatment,” and so forth. What the heck, I said to myself. I locked them, so there. When we got to New York’s John F. Kennedy Airport, no such hazards awaited us. They courteously directed everybody in line from our Hongkong-JFK flight to one of the windows. The Immigration officer was a polite young gentleman with the ominous name of, would you believe, “Killshot”. He smiled at Precious and me. He riffled through my worn-out passport, and grinned: “Boy, you’ve been to a lot of places.” I replied, “Guess so—it’s my job.” He asked me to put my left forefinger in the machine which leaves no smudge marks, then my right forefinger. “This one’s dry,” he smiled, “please rub it on your forehead.” I did and repeated the dry-run. He stamped our passports, said, “Welcome to New York” and waved us through. Our bags were already on the carousel when we got there. I grabbed the three off the carousel into a cart and then walked through to the Customs exit. The Customs man took my form, helped me fill out a couple of blanks I had overlooked, then said, “Okay, sir.” And we were out in the lobby, without fuss or fidget! Oh, well. A caveat. Don’t take my word for it and blame me if you make a similar expedition and you don’t simply breeze through. Immigration, Customs, or Security personnel get off on the wrong side of the bed sometimes. Or you might look like Ali Baba, or a Senator, or a columnist who writes fiction. In sum, anything could, or could not happen. However, the bad things predicted didn’t happen to us. But it’s early days yet. The same Grinch who stole Christmas may still get a crack at us, especially when we exit Los Angeles (where I’m supposed to give a speech to a Filipino organization). They might interrogate me on what Mickey Mouse revealed to us in Disneyland.

Another myth you mustn’t listen to is the one which says it’s now getting warm in New York and New Jersey. It was fine but very cold when we ventured forth for a Portuguese dinner in Linden, New Jersey—in a place frequented by Longshoremen named L’ Algarve. Today, it’s raining outside my hotel window. The temperature may drop to 12 degrees celsius from a high of 19 centigrade in the daytime. Would you believe, though, some fellows are already sporting T-shirts, while I shiver in my woolies. (Just proves I’m a hot-blooded Ilocano).

May 1, 2005
SALT LAKE CITY, Utah—It’s just a four-hour, 45-minute flight by Delta Air jet from Washington, DC, but when you land in Salt Lake City, capital of the state of Utah, you almost immediately know you’re in a different world. There are only 2,233,200 Utahns (half of them in Salt Lake City) living in 84,990 square miles—an area so large you could squeeze in Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Maryland into it and still have room to shoehorn in Rhode Island. This is because much of it is desert country, girdled by soaring mountain ranges most visibly the middle Rocky Mountains punctuated by the 14,000 feet-high, snow-covered Wasatch, Uinta and Bear River Ranges.

The people of Utah appear a different breed—courteous, well-mannered, nondrinking, nonsmoking (by golly!), and friendly. Remember what they always say about Washington, DC: “If you want a friend in this town, get a dog.” Shucks. In Utah, even the dogs are friendlier. It’s not difficult to learn why. We were met at Salt Lake City’s airport by Norman D. Shumway and his charming wife, Luana. When I suggested we call a porter as our suitcases came out on the carousel, Norman shook his head gently, then grabbed each one, hefted them onto a trolley, and whisked us off into the basement parking lot to his car. This muscle-man didn’t look like one in his sedate business suit, but I found he was a youthful seventy-one years old! What’s more, he had been a Congressman for six terms (12 years) in the 14th District of California—his district had included Lake Tahoe, and he was a Republican! He just kept on winning election after election until he decided to retire and go full time working for his church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, which we call the “Mormons.”

My wife and I came here to visit the Saints (LDS), and Norman and Luana were our “Directors of Hosting.” Norman Shumway even speaks Japanese (Nippongo) fluently, he and Luana having lived in Tokyo for eight years, three and a half years of that period as “president” of the Mormon (Latter Day Saints) missionaries in Japan. He even writes Japanese, having command of at least 2,000 kanji, not simply katakana or hiragana. You’ll find thousands of missionaries (including Filipinos) in our own country. They are easily spotted—not just in their spectacular Temple in White Plains but all over town—since most of them are young fellows attired as if in uniform in a white shirt with a tie, and traveling in pairs. In a country like ours, 82 percent Catholic,
we might also be surprised to learn that there are already half a million (yep, over 500,000) Filipinos professing the Mormon faith. Today, there are about 60,000 “volunteer” Mormon missionaries spreading the “Word” in 165 countries. They are generally young men between 19 and 26 (every male is expected to serve two years as a missionary—and they pay their own way). The monthly subsistence expense of $375 to $400 per month comes out of the volunteer missionary’s own pocket, or from his family. More and more young women, they told us, are volunteering, too, but are expected to do missionary work for a shorter period of eighteen months. Such zeal has jumped the Church of Latter Day Saints to Number Four in the ranking of Christian sects in the United States (they recently overtook the “Church of Christ”)—and they now have 12 million Mormons worldwide, with over half of that number overseas. Their apostolic zeal, quite clearly, has paid off.

One thing they did have in common with our late Pope, His deceased Holiness Pope John Paul II. The Mormon Church preaches that children are blessings from God and that the bigger the family the better. Nope, no more “plural wives” or polygamy either. This was rescinded in 1890 by the Church. In September 1890, the new Church president Wilford Woodruff, issued a manifesto declaring he had received revelations from the Lord instructing him to direct all members to stop practising polygamy. (Anyone still practising it gets arrested for bigamy by the government, anyway). This was not so in the early Church. The founding Prophet Joseph Smith—who founded the LDS in a log cabin in upstate New York on April 6, 1830—had multiple wives. You know, the revelation to go and multiply. “The doctrine of plural marriage” was officially upheld by his successor, Brigham Young in 1852. When I was a boy, I saw a movie about “Brigham Young” and what stuck in my mind was the statistic that he had 27 wives! He had 57 children by 16 of his wives. Indeed, he is rumored to have had as many as 56, although several of his wives had been the wives of the Prophet Joseph, left widowed when the prophet was murdered by a mob while in prison in Carthage, Illinois, on June 27, 1844. The mob had stormed the jail and shot down Smith and his elder brother Hyrum. From the very beginning, the Mormons had been cruelly persecuted by both fellow Americans and the government itself.

In any event, they’ve made the “desert bloom” into the state of Utah, multiplied, overcome every hardship and obstacle, and attained many of the highest offices in the land—including becoming Senators,
members of the House of Representatives, justices of state Supreme Courts, Governors, and so forth. To cite just two, Senate Minority Leader, Sen. Harry Reed (Republican-Nevada) is a Mormon, as well as Governor M. Romney of Massachusetts. They made history by hosting the 2002 Winter Olympics in the world-famous powder snow high up in their beautiful Wasatch Mountains. In sum, Utah – still 65 percent Mormon—is topnotch in the US!

May 11, 2005

I confess to having been since 1977 a Star Wars fanatic. (Call us the Fandom Menace if you will, but everytime a Star Wars movie would crest on the verge of the galaxy, it was for us inveterate fans a time for celebration). It was in 1977 that the words were first uttered, “The Force be with you.”

The first Star Wars dreamed up and put on film by genius George Lucas was supposed to be a fairy tale—a film for children. Let Lucas speak for himself, “Explaining that first movie, he had said: “I saw that kids today don’t have any fantasy life the way we had—they don’t have Westerns, they don’t have pirate movies, they don’t have that stupid serial fantasy we used to believe in.” And so he spun the tale, a sort of cosmic Western motion picture. Young Luke Skywalker (starring Mark Hamill) gets involved in somebody else’s war. He meets a mysterious hooded man, Obi-Wan Kenobi (played by the late Alex Guinness) who gifts him with a laser sword, now famous as the “light-sabre”, and the watchword, “May The Force be with you!”

Obi-Wan sets Luke off on a mission to help a beautiful princess (Carrie Fisher) battle with the villainous Darth Vader and the evil Empire. Luke is helped in his quest by two robots—R2D2 and the talkative C3PO. Then there comes Hans Solo to the rescue, unforgottably Harrison Ford in space togs. Although it was kid’s stuff, it turned out to be sheer magic. And the kids themselves who were its target audience grew up to become fathers themselves and even grandfathers—begging for more Star Wars adventures. When this writer was in the United States, it was all Star Wars hype from city to city. Would George Lucas, in his final “prequel” fall flat on his face—or,
as *Entertainment* magazine put it on its cover blurb, “Will ‘REVENGE OF THE SITH’ Save the Lucas Dynasty?”

Lucas, grown gray since his first *Star Wars* movie 28 years ago, agonized over this final sally into space, “a long, long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away . . .” Well, here’s the score. The first *Star Wars* grossed $1.5 million in its opening weekend, and six months later beat even Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws* as all-time domestic box office champ. The second movie, *The Empire Strikes Back* grossed $6.4 million in its opening weekend, in 1980. The third, *Return of the Jedi* set single and opening day box office records.

After a 16-year hiatus, Lucas took up his camera again, this time to give us the “prequel” to the three box-office starbursts. He got away with the gamble of doing a screen series backwards: the ending first, then the three-episode beginnings! As it was revealed in the second episode, Luke and Princess Leia discover that instead of being attracted to each other as lovers, they are linked together as brother and sister. In the final episode, *Jedi* Luke discovers something more shocking: that the evil Darth Vader is actually his father—the former cute but forceful young boy, Anakin Skywalker.

Then, after 16 years’ intermission, Lucas undertakes to chronicle, in a trilogy, the saga of the twins’ father, and in the end, how noble *Jedi* knight Anakin Skywalker falls from the good side of The Force to its Dark Side, and, flesh burned away, transmogrifies into Darth Vader. Thus, *The Phantom Menace*, next *Attack of the Clones*—and today, *Revenge of the Sith*. *Phantom* had done financially well, grossing $100 million in five days, but had proven a bit of a disappointment. *Clones* was less successful at the box office, but still made $80 million in its first weekend. But *Revenge* is Lucas’ triumph and vindication! It went over the top!

On the first day of its showing in the U. S., it broke all box office records beyond imagination, by grossing $550 million! It’s not just the money—but I’ll settle for that if I had my druthers. *Revenge of the Sith* from its very reel knocked you out of your socks. Lucas almost worried himself to death, we’re told, over his fear of failure. He need not have fretted. It was his masterpiece. It made you laugh, it made you cry, it kept you at the edge of your seat.

There’s something touching about the tragedy of handsome Anakin (Hayden Christensen) falling from noble *Jedi* knight, full of idealism
and valiant in every way, to the dark side of the force – hoping to save his wife, the beautiful Queen Padme Amidala (Natalie Portman), from a painful death foretold in a dream. Anakin falls into becoming Darth Vader—as for the nightmare about Padme? I won’t tell; you’ll have to see the movie. In the end, there’s Yoda, who needs no explanation.

I was in Washington DC when I got a text message from my nephew, Bokie Soliven, the president of Warner Philippines. (His company also distributes Harry Potter). “Uncle Max,” Bokie texted, “are you in town? There’s a premiere we’re holding of Revenge of the Sith next Wednesday.” I wasn’t in town—so I missed that premiere—for the record the first time the movie was exhibited in the world. When I got back, however, Bokie helpfully scheduled a second premiere. We went to see it—and it was socko.

George Lucas demonstrated once and for all that The Force is with him. Only if you believe in fairy tales can you appreciate Star Wars. Only if you believe that fairy tales come true, can you banish the dark side of The Force from your life, forever. So, take up your light-sabre, swing it high, and return to the battlefield of life—restored in vigor and hope.

May 24, 2005

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The offensive launched by 1,000 U. S. Marines, sailors, and soldiers yesterday in the city of Haditha in Iraq’s Anbar Province was obviously intended to bag the troublesome guerrilla leader, Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and smash insurgent bands whose operations, including almost daily suicide or car-bombings, and ambushes, have slain more than 620 people since the new Iraqi government was installed last April 28. The other week, a similar massive American sweep was conducted in towns bordering Syria to mop up mostly “foreign fighters” who have been infiltrating into Iraq along the 380-mile-long border with that militant state—which has just broken off relations, by the way, with the United States.

Although there was a “report” on the Web that al-Zarqawi had been “wounded,” this is not being given credence even by the Americans. How do you corner an elusive guerrilla leader like the 37-year-old Jordanian
who is already a legend among *jihadis* for his ruthlessness, including the beheading of a number of foreign hostages including American engineer Eugene Armstrong who was taken hostage in Baghdad last September? Zarqawi’s militants are even believed to have been the ones who captured Filipino OFW Angelo dela Cruz and threatened to behead him, “forcing” President GMA to withdraw our very tiny Filipino contingent from Iraq. What’s interesting is that Zarqawi used to be a petty criminal in Jordan, described as “a simple, quick-tempered and barely literate gangster.” He later joined the foreign fighters who fought the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s (along with the Abu Sayyaf’s late Abdurajak Janjalani) and rose to prominence, although not on par with al-Qaeda’s Osama bin Laden, as one of the “Afghan Arab” leaders. He was arrested in Jordan shortly after his return, and imprisoned there for seven years, accused of plotting to overthrow the King and establish an Islamic caliphate. After his release, he fled the country and, after a period of asylum in Europe, resurfaced in Iraq. His group is considered mainly responsible for the kidnappings, bomb attacks, and assassinations in Iraq, including the merciless attacks on Shiite Muslims (he’s a Sunni) whom that fanatic denounces as “US collaborators” for having voted to elect the new Iraqi government and now dominating it, although they elected a Kurd as President.

The frustration of the American military in Iraq, for all their high-tech and powerful weaponry is a classic case of using a baseball bat to swat a fly. In truth, the tactics of guerilla warfare have not changed since the Chinese military genius, Sun Tzu, defined them three centuries before Christ. Sun Tzu’s thirteen essays on war have become a textbook, under the collective title of “The War of the Flea.” In sum, the great tactician’s primer on how a flea can sting a giant to death was taken to heart by China’s Communist leader Mao Zedong, coupled with battle-strategies of the Taipings, that strange Christian sect in China that had almost toppled the Manchu Dynasty between 1850 and 1864.

We should know how effective guerilla war can be from our own experience in the Philippines, when our *revolucionarios*, just having defeated the Spaniards, were compelled to fight the Americans who we had believed had come as our allies but stayed to conquer. Our hit-and-run tactics bled the US forces, although they finally prevailed. Our fighters killed more Americans than were slain in the Spanish-
American War. In that war, only 379 American soldiers and sailors had died. By 1902, when the Philippine-American war was formally declared "over," no less than 4,234 Americans lay buried in the Philippines, hundreds more had died at home of diseases contracted during the campaign, 2,818 had been wounded, and the cost of the "war" had come to $600 million.

In short, the U.S. had thought they had acquired the Philippines on the cheap by a fast-break Treaty of Paris signed with Spain on 10 December 1898. Article III of that sneaky Treaty signed the Philippines to US sovereignty. In a codicil, the US agreed to pay Spain the amount of $20 million. The inevitable cry went up that the Americans had "bought" ten million Filipinos at two dollars per head. The Revolutionary Government of our Gen. Emilio Aguinaldo protested that the Filipinos had already overthrown Spanish rule and the Spaniards had no right to turn our archipelago over to the Americans. The nerve of them: the American government of President William McKinley even called our soldiers *insurrectos*, subsequently *bandidos*.

In the end, for all the Americans' heavy losses, overwhelming American might decided the contest. Sixteen thousand Filipino "rebels" were mowed down by body count. (The actual total may have gone over 20,000). More than 200,000 Filipino civilians were dead, either from gunfire, starvation, or disease. Even the carabao population was a casualty—reduced in number to one-tenth. Alas, there were no television crews, or CNN, BBC and Fox News, to cover the horror, rapine and famine of that give-no-quarter four year struggle.

Before the U.S. launched their invasion of Iraq, I said in this corner, in three columns if I recall correctly, that the US, Britain and the "coalition" would certainly win the battle to oust Saddam Hussein, but they should prepare for the more terrible guerilla war which would follow. I reminded them of "the Philippine experience." Well, that's what is happening now. This is what I told the Command and General Staff College last Monday at the Officers Club House of Fort Bonifacio. They had assembled two "classes" of officers completing their nine-month course—one from Fort Bonifacio (Army) and the other from Camp Aguinaldo (Armed Forces in general)—for my lecture. It was a great experience, especially during the open forum following my "speech," with all the probing and intelligent questions coming from the majors, commanders, and ICDRs CGSC classes 43 and 44.
It is clear that these are officers destined for promotion to higher rank, probably a future Chief of Staff among them. Aside from the Philippine Army, Philippine Air Force, Philippine Navy, Tech SVCs, Coast Guard, and Reserve offices in the Staff College, there were five "foreign allied students," one from the Indonesian Navy, one from the Pakistani Navy, one from the Indian Army, one from the Malaysian Army and one from the Malaysian Air Force.

Some of the queries concerned the Vietnam War and what the US had learned from it. What had gone wrong in Vietnam? Did 58,022 Americans die in vain? Was America's "intervention" an awful blunder?

Having covered that war, its details remain fresh in my memory. But let me recall an article I wrote for MANILA magazine in 1985, on the occasion of tenth year anniversary of the Communist victory and the taking of Saigon in 1975, which I had entitled, "Is the Philippines Going the Way of Vietnam?" In that piece, I had reported how the leading American dailies from The New York Times and Washington Post to the Los Angeles Times had been rehashing old memories and analyzing "mistakes." TIME magazine and Newsweek had run cover-page play-ups, in imagery and painful photographs, about "The Legend of Vietnam". My old professor, Henry A. Kissinger, and the late President Richard M. Nixon, separately, published postmortems on the tragic, painfully botched war. "Who, me?" They had said in effect. "It wasn't my fault."

My old colleague, Joseph Lelyveld of The New York Times, was more sanguine in the piece he did for the Times' Sunday magazine. Headlining his article, "10 Years Later, the Vietnam War Burns on the American Mind," Lelyveld quoted Paul Melhercik, who was one of the think-tank on the war: "What we learned in Vietnam is we can't fight other people's wars." A lesson forgotten, I suppose—since the Americans are now asking themselves in puzzlement: What are we doing in Iraq?

One of the most pertinent questions thrown at me during the Fort Bonifacio "forum" was: How come, after the Americans left, the Saigon government was unable to fight off the Viet Cong and fell in 1975? To begin with, the Americans didn't "lose" that war technically. In 1970, they simply gave up, packed up, and left. They blamed us in the media. We journalists had brought the horror of that war, with American boys dying right and left, and thousands of civilians being killed, by way
of vivid television images right into the living rooms and bedrooms of America. We newsmen had free run of the place (we were losing photographers and journalists, too, in the fighting) and we told it like we saw it. The American public recoiled at the TV image they got. Americans were alarmed at the vivid newspaper reports of the bitter fighting, and the attrition in civilian lives. In March, 1969, at the peak of the American involvement, no less than 540,000 Americans were fighting in Vietnam. They learned, sadly, that “good intentions” and 8,000 raids by B-52 bombers, trying to zap Viet Cong guerrillas in the jungle with 500 to 1,000 lb. bombs, could not prevail. Imagine a Superpower humbled by barefoot or used-rubber-tire-soled battalions in black pyjamas!

And the ultimate lesson was this: that not all America’s vaunted air and naval power, her Marines on the ground and her paratroopers dropping from the sky, or airborne by helicopters, and every clever weapon and technological device—even that awful “Agent-Orange”—could succeed in propping up a corrupt and venal regime. You cannot call any country “a bastion of freedom” when its officials and officers are crooked and their people are not truly free. Abandoned by their US backers, the South Vietnamese Army and the Saigon government, after a few years of faltering combat, collapsed with a suddenness that caught even the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong by surprise.

Two years ago, I went to Hanoi to visit the redoubtable Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, who had defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu, organized the 1968 “Tet” offensive, and masterminded the final push to Saigon in 1975. General Giap, to my surprise, looked very much like Yoda in Star Wars and was a very small man, grey in his 90s and wizened by age. But his mind remained brilliant and his wit unbridled as we talked of the war, and even of how he had devised a means of “downing” those formidable B-52s. That fascinating conversation in his home will remain one of the most remarkable experiences of my career as a newspaperman. Giap’s strategy was simple, straightforward, and “innocent” in retrospect. He won by sacrificing men (and women) in the attack until he simply blasted and wore the enemy out. The “secret” was in getting men and women to make the courageous sacrifice of their own lives. That’s how Giap did it.

The irony of it all is that the Vietnamese have made peace with America in a manner that China and Japan never will. They’ve
welcomed the Americans back (and their dollars) with open arms—and, apparently, in all sincerity. Their economy is being subsidized, to a great deal, by the investments and money sent home by their own version of Balikbayan, the former 1.3 million “boat people” who fled the Communist take over or escaped during the persecutions of the postwar Pax Hanoi, and prospered in the U.S. and the West. Their billions of dollars sent back to the “homeland” and their returning children are now a strong support of Vietnam’s still-struggling but rising economy.

The Russians, who have almost as many proverbs as the Chinese, have a saying: “A bad peace is better than a good war.” This may be true. However, how can even a “bad peace” now be secured in Iraq? The Vietnam experience gives us hope, in retrospect, that this may—in time—be possible.

May 26, 2005

Jemaah Islamiyah, report the Indonesian police, detonated two of their bombs last Saturday in the town of Tentana on the island of Sulawesi (Celebes), which is in that part of Indonesia closest to the Philippines. What’s troubling is that, while 90 percent of Indonesia’s 220 million people are Muslim, in central Sulawesi, Christians almost equal Muslims in number. Some fifteen minutes following the first explosion, a relatively small one, a much bigger blast occurred later. The entire morning market lay flattened out by the force of the blast. Police later discovered an unexploded bomb just outside the neighboring Christian church. (A clergyman and 3-year-old boy were among the dead). Islamic militants appear in recent years to be actively seeking Christian targets. Just this past January, sixty homemade bombs were found in an abandoned house in Poso, located in the same district. Attackers have fired randomly into houses in the Poso region, ostensible to kill the Christians enclosed within. A Hindu woman and two Christian men were wounded in one attack last year. On the same day of the explosions, in a rural suburb of Palu, which is the provincial capital, two Christians were killed in a kris (machete) attack. Also in Palu, just this past May, a court prosecutor handling a number of
"terrorism"-related cases was murdered. He was Christian. In short, the jihad continues unabated.

This past Saturday's bomb attack occurred two days following warnings prompting the U.S. to close down its embassy and other diplomatic offices in Indonesia until further notice. The police said they have intelligence information suggesting that the Malaysian bomb-makers and terrorism suspects linked to last year's Sept. 9th bombing of the Australian Embassy in Jakarta (at which 10 died, all of them Indonesian, and a hundred were injured) may be planning more attacks. What is more, bomb makers Azahari bin Husin and Noordin Mohamed Top remain at large.

I was in Jakarta on the day of the bombing to meet then Presidential candidate, former Minister and retired General Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, alias S.B.Y. The carnage in front of the Australian Embassy's bomb-twisted gate (with the glass fronts of surrounding buildings also badly shattered, their facades pockmarked) was unbelievable. Despite the outrage, however, after he had visited the scene and commiserated with the wounded in a nearby hospital, S. B. Y. calmly went on to hold his birthday party in the old Jakarta Hilton. I remember him keeping still, all smiles, as artists in competition with one another vied to complete their cartoon sketches of him. This attitude of unruffled calm and self-confidence, despite the day's tragedy, served General Bambang well. Longing for a strong leader, the Indonesian electorate went for S. B. Y., tossing out their perceptibly weak-willed female President, Megawati Sukarnoputri. Sadly, Megawati had not inherited the flamboyance of her dad, Indonesia's founding father, Sukarno—known to all as Bung Karno, everybody's Big Brother.

In the years we covered the old Bung, despite his mistakes, his sometimes erratic behavior, his appetite for encounters with the fair sex, we couldn't help but admire his charisma, his flashy rhetoric, his incomparable swagger. Bambang, on the other hand, immediately following his ascension to the Istana Merdeka, has had to deal with the terrible aftermath of tsunami-related death and destruction, particularly in Aceh. But he did well, and pulled off a successful Bandung anniversary celebration which brought Asia's top leaders and Africa's rulers to that "reunion" in Jakarta and Bandung, including our own GMA. What angers Islamic militants is that President S. B. Y. then went to the United States last week for a friendly visit with U. S. Pres. George W. Bush.
As an offshoot of the Indonesian President’s visit, the Bush administration officially announced its decision to ease an arms embargo it imposed on Indonesia fourteen years ago after the Indonesian armed forces (ABRI) killed hundreds of protesting Timorese in East Timor, and unleashed militias sponsored by them on the unarmed population, most of the victims Christians. Washington DC stated Wednesday it would permit the sale of non-lethal defense equipment, such as transport vehicles and communications equipment, to the Indonesian military.

The U.S., I believe, is trying to undertake this “warming of ties” with Bambang’s armed forces and with his regime in general with some caution so as not to expose the new President to the accusation that he is an “Amboy”. This was the attack mounted against him by his political enemies during the campaign.

Indeed, Bambang is one of the Indonesian leaders I found most fluent in English, since he underwent advanced military training in the US, more than a year and a half of it in Ft. Leavenworth in which he was a classmate of our Armed Forces Chief of Staff, Gen. Efren Abu. In fact, after he was elected, Bambang invited Abu to a private dinner with him in the Istana Merdeka.

May 30, 2005

There has been a torrent of tributes to our Teddy Benigno—Teddy Man as everybody called him—so one more, mine, will appear redundant. But since I did not have a column yesterday, you’ll have to bear with my own thoughts on Teddy today.

Teddy didn’t go gentle into the night, as the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas keened in 1952, he “raged, raged against the dying of the light.” Not the light of his own life, he was more generous than that: he raged, to the very last, against the dying of the light of indignation and anger against corruption and injustice in our land. I believe his most painful disappointment was that the Revolution, which he saw as a necessity to sweep away evil, hypocrisy, humbug, and the “oppression” of our people never came. In his final months, he complained that he was surprised that the masses, whom he felt were
the most oppressed, seemed not just to accept their plight, but were indifferent to it, and did not rush to the streets in furious protest or to the barricades. One might disagree with the method he espoused, but everyone could agree Teddy Man was a passionate patriot, his brilliant prose flowing like poetry, his intellect both sharp and combative, a Spartacus calling on his fellow gladiators in the arena to rise up in arms, undaunted that many failed to heed his call.

One of his first, if not the first, of his columns when he started writing for us in The Star more than sixteen years ago was, “The Gathering Storm.” The next one was “The Gauntlet.” The gauntlet was thrown down, the challenge, that violence against injustice and inequality was stirring in the land—sixteen years ago. The storm has been gathering, in Teddy Man’s romantic book of prophecy, for sixteen years. It still hasn’t broke. In the verses of another poet, wrong rules the land and waiting justice sleeps. Yet Teddy’s Revolution has not erupted.

Sleep, Teddy: a warrior gone deservedly to your rest! Inspired, provoked is a better term, by your burning words we may yet have a Revolution—but hopefully, it won’t be one of violence, but a Revolution of the heart.

I remember vividly, how Teddy came to us in our newspaper. He was Pres. Corazon C. Aquino’s Press Secretary, one of her brightest Cabinet members, a confidant of the late Ninoy, a veteran journalist distinguished in every way—and an old friend. One day he rang me up: “Max, mon cher,” he started out in French. I picked up on this overture, and our entire telephone conversation was in French. He asked me the astonishing question: “Maxie, do I have a job with you?” Amazed, I replied: “But Teddy, you have a job!” “No,” he sighed, “I am resigning. My question is: Will you give me a job? Can I write for you?” Recovering from my surprise, I answered: “Of course, Teddy! We would be delighted and honored to have you! Can we make you Editor-in-Chief?” That was my snap offer, and I meant it. “No, no, my friend,” Teddy said. “I only want to write a column.” “How about daily?” I suggested. “That’s too much—only two or three times a week,” Benigno cheerfully said. “What you pay me, I leave to you and Betty” (Betty Go-Belmonte, our Chairman of the Board, the late cofounder of this newspaper, and, by the way, The Philippine Daily Inquirer, too). We agreed to meet the following day, when Teddy told me of his disappointments—and why he was quitting the Cory Cabinet. In any event, he’s already, in the past, had his say
on the matter, and he and former President Cory reconciled and have remained, up to the last, the best of friends. That's how Teddy Man became our number one columnist, and a member of our Star Board of Directors. We're proud to have been associated with him, and having had him on our Team.

In his play, Julius Caesar, William Shakespeare put into the mouth of Mark Anthony's much-quoted funeral oration the following thought: "The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft-interred with their bones." For once, I've always thought, the Bard nodded. Mark Anthony's assertion is often untrue. In Teddy's case, what was good will never be interred with his bones—it will live on. Enough said. Teddy was a journalist whose vision went beyond words. He was a nationalist, whose nationalism is beyond cavil. He was a man of passionate causes—and of heart. Go with God, Teddy! We bid you a fond Adieu!

June 5, 2005

Now I feel like Ma Mon Luk. Yesterday morning's front-page photograph of this publisher paying my "last respects" at the bier of our friend and colleague, Teddy Man Benigno, was EMBARRASSING to say the least. Our editors meant well, but it appeared too much of a conceited propaganda gimmick, as if proclaiming, "see, how pious I am publicly praying (like the biblical Pharisee)". And so, I apologize to our readers.

Teddy Benigno was duly honored Monday evening at a necrological service in the Alfonso Legore Chapel of the Magallanes Church by former Pres. Cory Aquino, whose touching speech recalled how Teddy had been very close to Ninoy, and to herself, and how she had visited him in the hospital in his last days and they had prayed the Rosary—using a miraculous Rosary which she left with him. Her eulogy was followed by a moving and eloquent one by Quezon City Mayor S.B. (Sonny Belmonte) who, too, had in the past been a crackerjack police reporter. Sonny recalled how, when he himself had started out as a journalist in the now defunct Manila Chronicle, Teddy had already been an icon in journalism as a former Sports Editor, then Senior Editor in the Agence France Presse, later to become AFP bureau chief.
Sonny’s tribute, so candid in tone, but brimming over with affection, humor and allegory, demonstrated that the country had lost a good newspaperman when he decided to enter government service, then politics—rising to Speaker of the House of Representatives and then Mayor.

Former Senator Freddy Webb, sincere and surprisingly eloquent, thanked Teddy Man for his courage in comforting their family, coming to the defense of their son Hubert (going bravely against the tide), always courageous in espousing the causes in which he fervently believed, even in the face of critics and foes. In the last paragraphs of his brief address, Freddy broke down in tears—a manly tribute to Teddy Man, which transfixed the congregation.

Then there was Mark Benigno, Teddy’s 24-year-old son, recalling how many times he had been “scolded” by his father, how a 57-year generation gap had for some time made it difficult to relate with dad, but in the end he understood the love Teddy had felt for him, and how he wished they had spent more time together, instead of him (Mark) going out with friends or watching television.

Finally, Teddy’s daughter, also a writer, Nena Benigno, delivered a wonderful, heart-warming response on behalf of the family—recalling how, in the final days, Teddy in his sickbed, having led a full life, focused his gaze on the next. Teddy had “spoken” to God, saying that for years he had tussled with and fought with Him, but now he was surrendering to the Lord. He had murmured, “I fall on my knees . . . .” And thus, on his knees, in a loving surrender to the God whom he had “fought” in more combative days—Teddy flew home to Heaven. Nena had said that one of her dad's favorite phrases, one of the rules of his own life, was “I think, therefore I am.” Teddy had studied in France (I knew him there during his student days at the Sciences Politiques), his orientation was French, and, although 100 percent Filipino nationalist, I believe half his soul belonged to French philosophy and letters. Perhaps this was why he was so devoted to the idea of Revolution. It was the French philosopher Rene Descartes who had formulated the idea: Cogito ergo sum. (I think, therefore I am). In our class in Logic in the old university days, we used to quite—a pun on Descartes’ name—this was like “putting the cart before the horse.”

Teddy Benigno was that rarity, a thinker who could put his thoughts into brilliant and elegant prose. As Sonny Belmonte had remarked, he sent his readers rushing to their dictionaries. Above all, Benigno was
a fighter. He had called his television show, the “Firing Line.” He never hesitated to fire away. He swam against the tide. When his convictions moved him to make a stand, he stood pat come hell or high water—right or wrong. One word was used by almost all who spoke of him, and this was “passion.” He was passionate in everything he undertook. Did not our Lord once say, “if ye be lukewarm, I will spit thee out of my mouth”? Benigno was anything but lukewarm. Many disagreed with what he said and wrote. This did not deter him from his chosen course. He once wrote about a Freedom Force, drawing inspiration from “Star Wars”, the movie that had popularized the line, “May The Force be with you.” May The Force, indeed, be with all of us in this embattled and benighted country today. As for Teddy, may he have a warrior’s rest.

Coming from a generation of Manilans which was brought up on that famous “mami-siopao” really concocted by the late Chinese restaurateur Ma Mon Luk—I fondly remember his emporium in Quiapo where we used to enjoy that special treat (the secret was in the sauce). You could buy a mami-siopao meal for only ₱1.50—would you believe. Ma Mon Luk was deeply appreciated by all of us newsmen and editors of the old The Manila Times on Florentino Torres street, in Sta. Cruz, a few blocks away from Quiapo. For the legendary siopao king would visit our office, bringing over baskets of steaming siopao, or handing out tickets which said: “Good for two Mami-siopao” at any of his eateries. In those halcyon years, The Manila Times owned by the Roces clan (our Publisher was the heroic Chino “Tatang” Roces, our President was my patron, Don Benito “Bibilo” Prieto) was the biggest daily. All the other dailies combined could not come up to half the Times’ circulation. Would you believe, after the late, great President Ramon Magsaysay died in a tragic plane crash on Cebu’s Mount Mannugal on March 17, 1957, a few days later, The Manila Times ran a large photograph on the front page depicting Ma Mon Luk standing in meditation in front of President Magsaysay’s coffin above a caption which blared forth: “Ma Mon Luk Pays Last Respects to Fallen Leader,” or words to that effect! Wow! On page one of the largest newspaper! Ma Mon Luk deserved the front page more than me.

June 8, 2005