Today is the 107th anniversary of the declaration of our Independence. I'm tempted to say that we've squandered all the opportunities accorded us by our defeat of the Spanish colonial government (for indeed, our Revolucionarios overthrow them only to be double-crossed by our "allies" the Americans) and our subsequent recovery of our liberty from the United States in 1946. We're a nation, once so forward-looking, that has stagnated, with the rest of our neighbors passing us by.

Yet, at the risk of being hooted down, I'll say that, despite everything—including corruption, violence and mayhem—we're still a national capable of regenerating ourselves and, if we try hard enough, get ourselves back on the slippery road to progress. What we're suffering most from, aside from a breakdown in morality and a dismaying spread of pessimism, is a brain drain. We like to call the more than 7.5 million overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) heroes and heroines—they're out there making a living they can't make at home, and send billions of dollars home—but they constitute a serious brain drain, not to mention having to sacrifice in terms of divided families and longing for the homeland. Too many of them, coming to terms with or enjoying life in the diaspora, will never come home again. Then there are the many thousands of professionals, including our best doctors and executives, simply giving up and deciding to seek new lives for themselves abroad, getting their children away from the perils, crimes and disappointments of our land. This is a very serious problem which is escalating.

Investments are either evaporating, or escaping. This, too, is a sobering fact. If we keep on threatening coups, making angry noises all over the place, mounting radical demonstrations, and announcing new "impeachment" moves, everything and everybody will shy away from our troublesome archipelago. Why take a risk, foreigners with cash will say, when there are other more beckoning destinations for their capital? Money, after all, is the most paranoid and cowardly commodity in the world. Capital has no homeland—it goes where there is a profit to be made, and avoids places where risk is involved, or any storm clouds cast gloom on the horizon.

Last week, I caught the tail-end of a debate on television entitled, I think, "Diploma versus Diskarte." The gist of the argument, in part, was that diplomas (in a land in which even fake diplomas can be bought on the street corner) are increasingly worthless, while there are school
drop-outs who have succeeded wonderfully in life, in business or in their careers. It's true that a diploma may only be a piece of paper, but it's the striving for that college degree which counts. What one learns which in college is not reflected in the diploma, but in actual knowledge and knowhow acquired. Thus the word "education" comes from the Latin *educare*, meaning "draw out." It's not a matter of "knowledge" being poured into a pitcher, for example, but an exercise in which a person's inner talents and gifts are drawn forth and developed.

As for school drop-outs, whom our media tend to glorify, those who make it big are the exception rather than the rule. In any event, I won't pose as an educator, although I taught in university for several years. All I can say is that education is deteriorating disastrously in our country and, with the brain drain accelerating, we may end up as a nation of jobless *estamby*s at the corner store, or jeepney drivers, or parasitic politicians. This is the challenge which faces us on this Independence Day—to fight for one of our most important, but neglected freedoms, freedom from ignorance.

When all is said and done, however, we can still say—despite our disaffections, disagreements, and disgruntlement—that the cockeyed expression, "I'm okay—you're okay" can still apply to us. Our churches, of whatever denomination, are full of worshippers, rich or poor. We are still a nation that prays, that believes in God—that hopes for the best. And haven't you noticed? We're beginning to come to grips with our evils. On this day, I still recommend the deathless expression, my favorite, of the late Senate President Eulogio "Amang" Rodriguez: "In the long of time, we shall success." It's taking us longer than expected. But we shall.

June 12, 2005

It has become customary for Filipinos to ignore the Fourth of July, eager as most of us are to reinforce our "nationalist" credentials by criticizing or even bad-mouthing our former colonial overlord, the United States of America. I agree with the late Pres. Diosdado Macapagal's decision to move our Independence Day from July 4th to June 12, the day our Revolutionary government declared Independence.
Having said that, let’s cheer the American people today on what they call their Glorious Fourth—it was truly one of the most remarkable Revolutions in history. And the nation born of it, through many wars—including one of the most cruel Civil Wars—and challenges, for all their missteps and mistakes, remains vigorous and strong. What is remarkable about the men (and women) who made that Revolution is that they were ordinary folk who, for all their bickering among themselves—and, mind you, many in America fought for England and the Tory cause—finally came together in common purpose. The men who signed the Declaration of Independence did not, after putting their “John Hancock” (as the expression goes) on that stirring covenant, go off into history in a golden glow to be enshrined in the hearts of future generations (or to be forgotten by them as is the case today). They had to fight to make that Independence a reality. They pledged their fortunes, and their sacred honor—and often, they lost their fortunes, their homes, their families, and sometimes their own lives in the carnage of war. Many of the signatories were to die in battle. This is the price they paid.

This is why the Fourth of July is not merely fireworks, hot dogs, and speechifying. Our founding fathers, too, had that fire in the belly, that ideal of sacrifice. They, too, fought. Many also died. It is that legacy which we have lost. In our old National Anthem were the lines, corny if you will, which went, “with fervor burning, thee do our souls adore!” It meant that we loved our country with fervor. Does anybody love this country anymore? That’s where this generation has gone wrong. Too few love our country. Too many love themselves, and only themselves.

Coming back to the celebration of the United States, the man who led that Revolution has become stereotyped. It was Henry “Light-Horse Harry” Lee, one of George Washington’s dashing officers, who eulogized Washington in the flowery expression which has become immortal, as “first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen.” When you refer to America nowadays, you equate it with Washington, DC—the District of Columbia. Named after George W., it is the capital of the world’s number one superpower. Washington, of course, was the first president of the U.S., from 1789 to 1797. He indeed set America’s course in history, being the first elected chief executive of the country created by the Constitution of 1787. In truth, the fledgling leaders and the people of the proposed
Union had a difficult time approving that now famous Constitution, and only Washington's prestige and his support got them to approve it. Although he had sworn to retire, after forging together a Continental Army and leading it to victory, it was the thought that Washington could be "lured" out of private life to become the first president which finally got the Constitution adopted. I owe to Garry Wills' brilliant book, *Certain Trumpets: The Nature of Leadership*, the most compelling dissection of Washington's character. Had Washington aimed at dictatorship, he might have gotten that title, even for a while. He made clear, however, his respect for Congress, "his determination to live by the new law's letter, and his desire to serve only one term." In fact, a "Farewell Address," composed by James Madison (later himself to become president) was prepared for Washington's resignation after one term. But again, he was drafted into a second term. This time he was adamant about leaving office after that second stint of service. To this end, another "Farewell Address" was prepared, drafted this time by Alexander Hamilton. It reiterated Washington's old theme: that the new America should not be drawn into the imperial struggles of the great powers of Europe. Thomas Jefferson, who assumed office five years later, took up the same tack, pledging that America would never be drawn into "entangling alliances."

Washington's public virtue and his leadership, over the years, have grown so legendary, that only dedicated students of history and biography recall that in his younger years he was a notorious bungler, and even a failure. As Wills so perceptively noted, Washington came "from dim origins." His father, Augustine, had sent two sons from his first marriage to be educated in England, but the five children of his second marriage—including George—were stuck when Dad died when George was only 11. There would be no foreign education for them. The modest family estate (twenty slaves, only seven of them good workers) was consigned to the sons of the earlier marriage. The only prospect left for George's advancement was seen to be the military. As a young colonial militiaman, he proved himself endowed with a theatrical flair, but was otherwise unspectacular. Indeed, Wills records that as "a young colonel blundering through the back forests of America, he mistook a diplomatic delegation for an advance French war party, leaped upon it in a sneak attack at dawn, and let his Indian allies scalp the dead French officers—one of whom carried diplomatic credentials." By golly. Outnumbered afterwards by the French he had
been talking, the 21-year-old Virginia colonel was trapped by them, and, his unit having suffered heavy casualties was humiliatingly forced to surrender "on terms that admitted his crime against the dead diplomat." He later tried to defend himself by claiming he had not understood the French text he was signing! Not a propitious beginning, wouldn't you say, for a man who was to become the Father of his Country? But he learned from his mistakes. That's what I'd like to underscore about George Washington's character.

He was a true patriot in the final reckoning. When his army had won freedom, at the moment of victory in 1783, he had unconditionally surrendered his sword to Congress, promising not to take "any share in public business hereafter" and returned to his farm at Mount Vernon. It is this selflessness that won for him undying admiration—and established his reputation beyond reproach. First in war, truly then, first in peace—and, as Light-Horse Harry Lee so dramatically put it, "first in the hearts of his countrymen."

July 4, 2005

In these days of disillusionment and disappointment, it's heartening to recall that there are many Filipinos—the vast majority, I believe, truth to tell—who are constant and true. One of them was Col. Leon Hernandez—he never made it to General—who was once chief of the now-controversial ISAFP (Intelligence Service Armed Forces of the Philippines). If you'll recall, the "Doble" wiretaps of the "Hello Garci" conversations allegedly came from ISAFP files, whether spliced or doctored. Leonie Hernandez ran the ISAFP with confidence and diligence during the regime of President Diosdado Macapagal. His wife, Pie, was an American, she never induced him to be pro-Am. She was a wonderful lady, loyal, supportive, and with a great sense of humor.

Colonel Hernandez, was fiercely patriotic. I'll never forget what he said one day, during one face-up with the Americans on policy. He told this writer: "Max, the Americans in the basketball game of life are our friends, and our allies, but always and without confusion there is for us only one Team—the Philippine Team!" Was he a man of honor?
Just look at this: When Ferdinand E. Marcos, then Senate President and President of the Liberal Party, jumped over the fence and got the Presidential nomination of the Nacionalista Party to fight Macapagal who was running for reelection, Colonel Hernandez was approached by Macoy. He was asked, in seductive terms, to “tip” Marcos off about President Macapagal’s moves and movements, clandestinely, of course. It was hinted that his reward would be on earth, not in heaven. Hernandez replied to FM: “Sir, if you get elected and become President, I will be your most faithful officer but as long as President Macapagal is our Commander-in-Chief, it is my duty and honor to be loyal to him as the Constitution mandates.”

When Marcos became President, Leonie knew his career was over. He quietly resigned his commission, then went to work for Philippine Airlines in Honolulu, later in California, after which he retired. I last heard from Leonie a year and a half ago, when, after a long silence, he sent me a note to say that he had learned I thought he was “gone,” but that he was very much alive. Alas, I never got the opportunity to go and see him.

The other day, I received the following e-mail from Leonie’s daughter, Mrs. Bonnie Hernandez Boquer:

Dear Mr. Soliven,

My father, Leon Hernandez, often spoke very fondly of you. He loved telling stories of his days in Intelligence and as Wing Commander of Basa Airbase. Sadly, my father died on his 85th birthday, 3 May 2005. He had a stroke last October and it was downhill after that. He was living with my mother in the San Francisco Bay Area since the seventies. A few days before his death he told my siblings and me he was sad because he had nothing to leave us. What he left us was more precious than gold – he left us his honor and dignity, his good name and above all a shining example of humility, love and courage. The ideals he fiercely defended have become our ideals. He was a great man who loved his God, family and country above all else!

My grandson Justin called me from Hawaii he day after my father died. He said, “Nana, your Daddy’s in an airplane!” At that moment I knew Dad was sending
us a message—he was happy and flying his airplane into the ever after!
I have been trying to find your e-mail address for several months because my mother wanted you to know of my father’s passing. God bless!
(Sgd.) Bonnie Hernandez Boquer

August 14, 2005

Returning from Bangkok last night to the bumpy-bump of EDSA, I felt sad. In the early 1980s our peso was neck-and-neck with the Thai baht, both at 20 to the US dollar. Now, the Thai baht—which ironically triggered the domino effect of the 1993 Asian currency crisis—is rock-solid compared to our fluctuating peso. It currently stands at ¥40.85:US$1. This doesn’t mean, of course, that Thailand is on easy street. The soaring global price of oil is beginning to bite. The government heavily subsidizes fuel and energy, to the tune of billions of baht. This can’t go on forever. But here’s the score: the roads are smooth and well-paved, unlike the national disgrace that is our main street, EDSA. Bangkok is well-lighted, criss-crossed by expressways, overpasses, clover leafs, and now operating a subway line. Traffic continues to be terrible—but they’re coping.

Last night, we went to the Suan-Lum Night Bazaar, an oasis of well-laid-out shops—a sort of Chatuchak without the pollution, grime and heat. The “market” was neatly set up, with sidewalks, stall numbers, and bargains galore were to be found—but you have, as always, to bargain ruthlessly. The “Lum” in the night market’s name means that it is at the edge of the famous Lumpini Park in the heart of the city.

Bangkok’s taxicabs are clean, efficient—and safe. The meters clearly tick away giving the passenger an idea of what he should pay. The foreign tourist and out-of-town visitor feel welcome in that bustling metropolis of 10 million. The downtown malls, like the Erawan Mall, the World Plaza, and other buildings are interconnected with covered elevated walkways, firmly concrete and iron-grilled. The Sky Train
whisks you, in air-conditioned comfort, from one station to another across the city rooftops for as low as 10 to 40 baht a ride. It's pricey for the local working stiffs, but perfect for middle class commuters and farang (foreigners).

We left for Manila, as usual, from the modern Don Muang International airport. An expressway gets you there from your hotel (in my case The Oriental) in just half an hour. In the old days, the trip from airport to hotel used to take an hour and a half! Do the Thais rest on their laurels? In 2002, seeing Don Muang's terminals becoming overcrowded, they began building Suvarnabhumi airport terminal, expected to open before the end of this year. Don Muang is already the world's twenty-second busiest airport serving about 60 international carriers. The new Suvarnabhumi will be capable of landing seventy-six flights per hour in its two runways. Some 45 million passengers a year will be funnelled through fifty-one gates and sixty-nine remote bays. The seven-floor-563,000-square-meter terminal, the Thais boast, will be the world's largest. It is located 25 km from Bangkok and will be connected with the capital's Outer Ring Road—and the expressway to the resort city of Pattaya on the seashore.

This writer rushed back to Manila to address today's National Retailers' Conference and "Stores Asia Expo 2005" as keynote speaker at the EDSA Shangri-la. What will I tell them about the contrast between Metro Manila, where our mayors are squabbling endlessly with the Metro Manila Development Authority Chairman and Bangkok, where they've apparently gotten their act together?

That Thailand teems with tourists is evident from early dawn to way past midnight. This doesn't mean that Thailand's pugnacious, hard-fisted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra isn't being forced to swim against the current in a sea of troubles. He's grappling with Muslim "revolt" in the south—almost as deadly if not as well organized as ours in Mindanao. He's battling charges of running a corrupt government. He's cracked down savagely on the media, which is biting back. But Thaksin's got guts. To cope with unrest in the southern Muslim provinces (adjacent to Malaysia), the King granted him emergency powers, which are being hotly contested. Thaksin has deftly been promising to "soften" them, but smilingly sidesteps actual measures to demonstrate his avowed policy of sweetness and light. Bannered The Nation, the rival of the Bangkok Post (my alma mater, for whom I used to write a weekly column), before Shinawatra's flying visit to the
three most troublesome provinces in the south: “THAKSIN READIES GENTLER SOLUTIONS.” He gave a few speeches, comforted the widows and orphans of those who died in recent violence, but nothing gentle emerged in reality.

Thaksin’s popularity may have sagged, but the silent majority of Thais seems to approve of their feisty, multibillionaire Prime Minister’s take-no-prisoners approach to politics and “war.” In Narathiwat last Sunday, Mr. T was in vintage fighting form. He told the southern residents to suppress their fear of Muslim insurgent attacks and return to “normal life.” “Stop that fear and rise against them.” He declared. “Officials will help you bring the bad guys down. I believe you all know they are not in big numbers . . . not more than 15 in each village.”

Thaksin, having been a big businessman in electronics, certainly is not faulty in his arithmetic. Surely he recalls that a mere nineteen Islamic fanatics, hijacking four commercial airliners, devastated the Twin Towers in New York and battered the Pentagon during the attacks of 9/11. Columnist Sopon Onkgara of The Nation bashed Thaksin for the security precautions taken to disguise his destinations, sneering: “It is not so difficult for us to understand that a man who displays so much bravado resorts to excessive protection out of plain fear. His occasional gallantry, mostly through the microphone, has been . . . for a gullible and naive audience.” The columnists shrugged in frustration at the fact that many believe Thaksin “selfless and sincere. They certainly don’t expect someone who governs with guile and deceit, all for his own self-serving interest.” More barbs: “Thaksin simply continues to blame everyone but himself for repeated errors in judgment in assigning officers to this crisis zone in the first place . . . The three southernmost provinces have become all but a total war zone.”

Bangkok, the capital, in contrast is no war zone, except for the petty verbal scuffles between shoppers and crafty vendors who switch wares when they pack them, disarming you with that patented Thai smile. The tourist and his Baht, or dollar, are easily parted in this Land of Smiles. You don’t feel the pain, that’s the trouble. You’ve been mesmerized by the easygoing manner, and the silk soft summer days.

August 18, 2005
Excepting opinion writers who, like myself, on the occasion of the man’s birth anniversary, will be making an effort to say something “meaningful” about Manuel L. Quezon (MLQ), many others would have to admit they’re clueless about Quezon, the first President of our Commonwealth, who, on a personal level, oozed with charisma and dynamism, cut a handsome figure doing the Tango with the ladies he always had an eye out for, yet who, publicly, possessed nerves of steel. In the ears of these latter folk, the sound, “Quezon,” not unlike the sound, “Rizal,” might bring up thoughts of an avenue, a city, a province, a traffic rotary. Yet as a “nation builder,” he truly was without peer. Never had the Americans, our colonial masters at the time, experienced anyone staring them down as he did. Gen. Douglas MacArthur, whom Quezon “hired” for the purpose of building the Commonwealth’s armed forces, disliked MLQ so intensely (in a classic clash of egos), that he once sneeringly compared him to a “peacock.” MacArthur’s aide, Lt. Col. Dwight D. Eisenhower (later General “Ike,” and subsequently US President), on the other hand, liked Quezon tremendously, maybe as much as he detested MacArthur, his boss.

Although my late father, Ilocos Sur Assemblyman Benito T. Soliven, clashed bitterly with President Quezon on the “block voting” issue, which resulted in his name being scratched off by the latter from the official Nacionalista Senatorial line-up, he genuinely liked Quezon. To him—and to this writer—Quezon represented to Filipinos what was best and worst in them. He was bantam sized (and had a high-pitched voice), but his achievement looms larger than anything of which I can think. He was ruthless (as when he dealt with his political foes), yet was capable of displaying genuine compassion (as when he retrieved them from misfortune). He was selfish when opposed, yet was always gracious and generous in victory. He was proud, but on occasion would display genuine humility. Above all, he loved his country, if not always wisely, then at least always well.

He was proud of the Filipino, and how his anger would blaze over the least perception that the Filipino was being given short shrift. Around the time of the acrimonious debates stirred up by the Tydings-McDuffie Independence Act, he wrote [a paraphrase]: “Let the historian go over what we all have said and done at this moment in our history, which will be shown to either construct or destroy our nation, because then it would seem to him how petty and small our dissensions and disputes have been!
How insignificant our cherished slogans must seem when it is the nation's future safety and welfare that you put in the balance!"

So valiant, indeed, was Quezon in life that when the news of his death was transmitted to then Vice-Pres. Sergio Osmeña, Sr., who for 39 years in his own political career had suffered defeat and humiliation at Don Manuel's hands—news that also would have meant his own accession to the Presidency—tears sprang to the latter's eyes unbidden. Those two giants of our Golden Yesterday possessed diametrically opposite personalities, but both were caballeros, gentlemen of the old school, pledged to honor and to delicadeza. We truly could use leaders like them today!

Coming from a generation that was unable to witness MLQ's actions, or listen to the magnetic (although high-pitched) resonance of his voice, I attempted years ago to discover how he seemed to his own son, his junior, "Nonong" Quezon. Nonong, who had been 18 when his father died in August 1944, was then living a reclusive life, in his final years even having to navigate in a wheel chair. He was the spitting image of MLQ, but whereas his father was flamboyant, extroverted, mischievous with the ladies, Nonong was quiet and reserved. He hesitated over my question. At last, he said that he had been taught by his father four things. The first was to be completely honest—never to tell a lie. The second was not to be vindictive. "When my father," he recalled, "was fighting a man, he fought him uncompromisingly and with every weapon at his command. But when the fight was over, and he had won or lost, he would always remark that a man should never bear a grudge." The third lesson was that a man should be grateful. He should be loyal to his friends, and never forget what they have done for him. But he also publicly drew the line on loyalty when he declared: "My loyalty to my Party ends where my loyalty to my country begins!" And, finally, he should be proud to be a Filipino. "Pride of race," Nonong pointed out, "was what my father always stressed." I learned besides that, despite Quezon's decidedly Spanish features, he seems not to have liked being singled out for his Kastila features. It did not matter to him that a man had Chinese, Spanish, or Malay-Indonesian blood in his veins—what was important was that he was in his soul a Filipino. In one of his dialogues, The Republic, the Greek philosopher Plato wrote that a state could be governed and divided into classes of men by means of a "needful falsehood." This lie, he said, would consist in the idea that
each was endowed by God differently from any other. In those who were to be given the power of command, God poured gold; others he made of silver, so they could be auxiliaries; those destined to be husbandmen and craftsmen of the lower classes, he fashioned out of brass and iron. In this egalitarian republic of ours, from Quezon—the First President of the Commonwealth—to the present President GMA, we Filipinos have never subscribed to this Platonic “falsehood,” as the Greek thinker himself admitted it to be. But we have, it seems, driven ourselves to despair by no less grave a misconception.

This misconception is the legend of the Golden Yesterday to which those in our midst who are old enough to remember, or to have known better, prefer to cling. According to this legend, the Filipino of prewar days was far more noble, self-sacrificing and wise, than the Filipino of today. In those days, we recall in awe that the National Assembly was composed of men of dignity and integrity—a legislature free from wheeling-and-dealing, from arrant corruption, and from uncouth invective. It appears there were no scandals involving cronies or kickbacks, and “commissions”, graft and corruption were minimal or virtually non-existent, and our leaders were endowed with a sense of duty and decorum unparalleled in this generation. In contrast, we appear to have shrunk into a lesser breed, deceived by clever and materialistic men, mesmerized by false promises, cowed, wallowing in cynicism and a climate of defeat, our corporations, banks and financial institutions weakened by the manipulations of the unscrupulous.

We owe it to Quezon and the men of his time, as well as to ourselves, to retrace this historical ground with the impartial eye of the scholar and discover how far we have been instrumental in deceiving ourselves. In the record of the petty squabbles that plagued even the giants—Quezon, Osmeña, Manuel Roxas, Rafael Palma, Jose Yulo, Juan Sumulong, Claro M. Recto, Jose P. Laurel, and the others—brilliant and patriotic though they were, we may be able to gaze into a mirror of image of the foibles of our day. This is not to “debunk” our Founding Fathers or detract from their glory, but to understand how they, like ourselves, were prey to the distractions, contending ambitions, temptations and inconsistencies of the modern—yes, the “New Filipino.” Their greatness lay in that they managed to rise above all these and forge a free republic out of a vision that transformed their combined weaknesses into a collective strength. Only by realizing this will we be able to hope again, to revive our flagging spirits, and begin to move this nation forward to a better day.
The late dictator, President Ferdinand E. Marcos, at the inauguration of his “New Republic” had called for a “new beginning,” a “vision of rebirth,” “a new people” and a “new government.” I remember with clarity that in 1965, when he first assumed the presidency, he put forward the doctrine of the “New Filipino.” And when he declared Martial Law on 21 September 1972, he announced the advent of a Bagong Lipunan (“New Society”)—rejecting the subversion, the corruption, the “private armies,” the entrenched monopolies and familial oligarchs of the defunct “Old Society.” But “new” is not a magic word that automatically sets things right, banishes injustice or inequality, and transfigures the hearts of men. In the fairy tales, Ali Baba could shout “Open Sesame!”—and the mountain would show the opening into it they could go through. But fairy tale time is over and cold reality stares us in the face. Faith can, indeed, move mountains, but mountains are moved faster by bulldozers with determined and dedicated men at the throttle.

Part and parcel of our persistent moral dilemma is the belief that crime does pay. The thesis that punishment follows crime—the same tenuous relation between crime and punishment worried and agonized over by the great Russian writer Dostoevsky in his classic novel—still remains to be proven and it cannot be proven by catchwords or glowing press releases, only by results. When I first went to Germany decades ago, I marvelled at the 4,600 miles of wonderful Autobahnen and their efficient network of motor ways. But the Germans themselves recall that it was Adolf Hitler who introduced the first Autobahn and those excellent concrete highways, and yet his regime came to an unhappy end. For the true touchstone of a nation’s wellbeing are not its smooth roads or bountiful harvests, but the happiness of its people. Progress is great but it is a relentless truism of history that before a leader frees his people from hunger, he must first free them from fear. Fear of violence or crime, fear of injustice, fear of being trampled by the high-handed or the powerful.

By the same token, the poor must not be taught that the world owes them the goodies of life for “free”. Society owes them the opportunity to make a living, to be educated and trained, to rise up the ladder through true grit and determination. The noble-sounding principle of England’s legendary Robin Hood, one of my boyhood heroes, has proven in the end impractical, self-defeating and unfair, and should have died with the swashbuckling actor, Erroll Flynn. One does not “rob the rich to give to the poor.” For when the rich become poor themselves, the poor end up
poorer than ever before. Britain's "Iron Lady", Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, once said something memorable and true: "Before we talk of sharing the national wealth, we must first create a national wealth." The great Chinese sage Laozhu similarly summed it up when he said: "If you give a man a fish, he will eat once. If you teach him how to fish, he will eat all his life."

When our hero, Sen. Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino, and this writer were prisoners of the Marcos military, in maximum security prison in Fort Bonifacio, our great but unexpressed concern was that Marcos might really go "straight," really impose an honest, if authoritarian, "Bagong Lipunan"—something for which our people clamored. If that were the case, Ninoy and myself, and our fellow prisoners in the same bunch of cubicles—Chino "Tatang" Roces, Nap Rama, Soc Rodrigo, Monching Mitra, Teddy Locsin Sr., Pepe Diokno, Jose Mari Velez, would be completely forgotten, damned as "old society" villains, and left to rot in jail. However, a tiger cannot change its stripes. The old, greedy Macoy was there, a wolf in the disguise of a shining "savior"—worst of all, Macoy was greedy for power, not just wealth. He let his First Lady Imeldific loose, so she would attract all the lightning of indignation, acquiring shoes and pelf, while he hid in the shadow of her extravagance and extravaganzas. Is there anything new under the sun? Again, we are involved in political fun and games. Accusations fly hard and fast. It's still the same old story, as the song went in the old movie "Casablanca," a fight for love and glory—for each one in contention—a sordid fight, at that.

By sharp contrast, Manuel L. Quezon was a shining star, a patriot like his rival and contemporary Osmeña. We were blessed by the towering presence of those two men. Don Sergio was self-effacing, whereas Quezon was mercurial and showy, truly "the stormy petrel from Baler." Ninoy Aquino is a man fashioned in Quezon's mold. It would be wrong for President GMA to declare August 22 a "holiday" simply because it's Ninoy's date of assassination, August 21 (1983), falls on a Sunday. My brod Ninoy didn't believe in holidays. He believed in hard work—he was a ball of fire, a force of nature, exuding enormous energy and zest, always in a hurry, always in forward motion. In the end, he hurried to his own death—his date with destiny. "If I should die," Ninoy had replied to me in a message sent through his sister after I warned him he would be killed if he returned, "then so be it. But I hope that my death will awaken our
people to the need to stand up and fight for ourselves!” This is Quezon’s legacy to us. This is Ninoy’s legacy, too. Fight! Fight! Fight!

August 19, 2005

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My alma mater has called on me to help publicize a fund-raising musical for their scholarship program, sponsored by the College of the Holy Spirit Alumnae Foundation. Yes, you hear me right. I’m an alumnus, not an alumna, of the College of the Holy Spirit. In my childhood, our school was called “Holy Ghost College”, and boys were admitted to Kindergarten, First Grade and Second Grade. After that stage, I guess, boys were deemed dangerous to little girls and to themselves, and banished to such all-male reformatory schools as the Ateneo, De La Salle, San Beda, Letran, etc.

How did I get to be a “Paracletian”? I was a Kindergarten flunker. I first took Kindergarten in the St. Joseph’s Academy (same as Ninoy) and I flunked. In dismay, my father and mother enrolled me in the Philippine Women’s University (PWU), and again I flunked out of Kindergarten.

At the Holy Ghost College I finally came into my own. I topped the Kindergarten class there. This is no reflection, I trust, on the standards of the old College of the Holy Spirit. It was a vindication, I’d rather think, of the adage: If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again. The Holy Ghost nuns were wonderful. They taught you discipline. They didn’t spare the rod and thus didn’t spoil the child. (We kids, grateful for being rapped on the palm with a ruler, didn’t have any Human Rights lawyers then). My dad was a lawyer, but he believed in the don’t-spoil-the-child policy. As for mama, whom we adored, she loved us but also believed that when kids erred, a-slap-in-time saves nine. And you know, till now, I think they were right.

When I got to the Ateneo de Manila, our Grade School Principal was Fr. Luis Pacquing, S.J. A fellow Saluyot from Santiago and San Esteban, Ilocos Sur, Father Pacquing was one of those earnest educators who felt that a firm but friendly whack on the bottom for naughty Grade School boys was part of the Jesuit ratio studiorum. Father Pacquing was a great guy, and we all appreciated him—and his whacky walking
stick. We knew that when he commanded us to bend over, we had it coming. Forgive me for making Holy Ghost College and the Ateneo sound like plebe-bashing night at the Philippine Military Academy. We had in HGC "Sistahs" rather than Mistahs, but they had a stern Teutonic hand, accompanying each smack on the palm with an Ave Maria. At the Ateneo we had tough guys like Fr. John P. Delaney, S.J., who, even when he became, years later, the beloved and fighting head of UPSCA at the University of the Philippines, thought all the Soliven boys were trouble makers.

I last saw Father Pacquing during the closing months of the war in the guerrilla movement. We had come by sailboat from Sto. Domingo, past the Japanese Kempetai barracks in Vigan (the Japanese were very visible from our becalmed boat), and finally edged into Santiago Cove. There, to my astonishment and delight, was my Headmaster, Father Pacquing! He had lost most of his teeth by then, but was still the same, never-say-die, wisecracking priest, undaunted by the vicissitudes of war. He was "supervising" the activities in the Cove, where American submarines and PT Boats were sneaking in large quantities of weapons (US Carabines, bazookas, Grease Guns, and Thompson submachineguns at last) and ammunition for the USAFIP Northern Luzon guerrillas. We hugged each other, he grinned through his toothless gums, gallant as ever. We never saw each other again. Oh well. Nostalgia, they say, is the kingdom of the old. But it is a magic kingdom and the glow lingers long after those who warmed our hearts are gone—to heaven, where I know Father Pacquing went.

Before I lose sight of my goal in writing this column, here are the facts. Ms. Toni Gregory sent me the following note, alerting me to the fact that they had discovered my best-kept almost embarrassing secret: "Records of the College of the Holy Spirit (formerly Holy Ghost College) show that you started your education at our school." In this light (blackmail, I submit) Toni demanded my assistance in announcing that the Alumnae of the school were going to run a fund-raising drive, by sponsoring a musical by Repertory, Man of La Mancha. Here's what Toni said in her note:

*Being guided by the spirit, we are using this opportunity to honor the 'Man of La Mancha' in the community. We believe that in every man there is still that passion to pursue 'the impossible dream.'*
During these times we should spark among our men the courage to fight the dragon and again all odds, live up to their ideals and dreams. We, therefore, recommend that family members and friends bring their ‘Men of la Mancha’ to the opening night on November 11 . . . where they may be inspired by the song The Impossible Dream to be sung by Michael Williams who will play Don Quixote, Cocoy Laurel as the priest, Menchu Lauchengco Yulo as Aldonza (Dulcinea), Robbie Guevarra as Sancho Panza and Cathy Azanza as the niece. Direction is by Ms. Baby Barredo and choreographer is Douglas Nierras. It will be quite a stirring experience.

Well said, Toni. In prison, I will have to recall once more, one of the songs that kept our spirits high (no pun related to the above intended) was The Impossible Dream, along with Bayan Ko. You may think that you’re, by now, sick and tired of the lyrics of that song, but wherever you are, when once more you listen to the strains of that matchless song, and hear the words, you find it resonates just as powerfully as the first time you encountered it. “To fight the unbeatable foe; to right the unrightable wrong; to reach the unreachable star”—go for it! On my shelf are figures of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza—not to forget the Knight of the Woeful Countenance’s horse, Rosinante. I picked them up in Spain many years ago, just as I had read Cervantes as a boy. And forever we’ll remember and revere that sad, mad knight after whom the term “quixotic” was derived, forever tilting with windmills and fighting armies of sheep. Ridiculous but glorious—that’s who Don Quixote was.

Even in Cyrano de Bergerac, we come upon an echo of Don Quixote’s greatness. Cyrano is taunted with the challenge: “If you tilt with windmills, those giant arms will catch you and cast you into the mud!” To which Cyrano replies: “Or up among the stars!” That’s what we must continue to strive for, the impossible dream—and someday, God willing, our striving will make it possible. And, cast heavenward by the windmill’s gigantic arms—finally reach the unreachable star.

August 26, 2005
Xi'an, China—When one speaks about Shaanxi Province in Northwest China today, nobody identifies it with the runaway 9 percent progress of modern China even in the teeth of the oil crisis. China's breakneck drive to industrialization may gobble up over 8 percent of scarce oil and fossil fuels, but Shaanxi (Shensi) gobbles up much of China's history—a fact unnoted by headline writers.

Here it all began. Xi'an is a city nestled in a rich plain to the south of the River Weihe and north of the Qinling Mountains. The central Shaanxi plain has been inhabited by "Chinese" since the Stone Age. In 1953, archaeological diggers discovered the shards of a civilization 6,000 years old in the village of Banpo on the eastern outskirts of Xi'an. The excavation revealed the remains of 45 houses, six pottery kilns, plus 250 graves. Spadework unearthed working instruments, household utensils, mostly made of stone. There were knives, spinning wheels, axes, shovels, chisels, arrowheads and even millstones. Awls, needles, fishing hooks were found fashioned of bone. Imagine a "city" inhabited for six millenniums. Xi'an City, even if it were not so ancient comes as a surprise—a pleasant surprise. You expect to come upon a quaint but backward "museum" village teeming only with postcard vendors, souvenir stalls, tourist guides, touts, and the usual assortment of beggars kowtowing with their forehead furrowed by banging the pavement.

By golly, as your Boeing B-737-300 lands on a smooth tarmac, you step off into a huge chrome-plated terminal, glitzy, marble floored, humming with escalators, streamlined in every way (including automatic "don't touch" faucets. Brought in by Hainan Airlines as our group was, or by sleek Boeing B-777s and B-747s of China Southern (the airline we took from Manila), millions of visitors stream in annually into this sprawling, clean and up-to-date airport which makes our tatty NAIA-1 and NAIA "Centennial II" terminals look like provincial aerodromes. Motoring into this city of seven million provides a second shock of surprise. Xi'an is modern. Its City Wall, erected in 1374 during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) stands 12 meters high and runs 13.7 kilometers. It was built on the even earlier foundations of a city wall put up by the Tang Dynasty in AD 618-907. After more than 600 years of everyday use, however, residents complain, visible cracks have at long last begun to appear in portions of the wall. I wish our Department of Public Works and Highways had such a record of longevity in its works, where cracks appear within six months!
Xi'an—whose name means “Western Peace”—used to be the very ancient city of Chang-an (“Everlasting Peace”)—probably in the perspective of history China's most important city. When you see the wide tree-lined boulevards, each one of them putting our potholed, dingy, treeless EDSA (the Main Street of our nation) to shame, the flashy shopping malls, the impressive hotel facades lined with luxury brand magazines as in the Parisian model, featuring Rolex, Tudor, Blancpain, Audemars Piguet, Prada, Ferragamo—you name it—you experience culture shock. Here is Kentucky Friend Chicken with Col. Saunders leering at one and winking behind huge neon lights. A two-storey MacDonalds dominates the main drag. Carrefour of France occupies an entire building for its supermarket and department store. An immense Budweiser beer billboard blazing with neon in the distance. Double-decker buses, yellow-cream colored but London-style ply the avenues. Late model cars, SUVs, motorcycles, motorbikes, and a very few bicycles zip by. Convenience stores 7-Eleven styled but named Sea-something are ubiquitous. Restaurants are full of happy eaters till the midnight hour, and this on a weekday. People can be seen dancing in the park to the beat of disco music, or even in the sedate waltz. Xi'an is a wide-open city that seems, like the old New York used to be—a city that never sleeps. But beware of rash conclusions. China is the homeland of the worker ants. They'll be back at work when the factory whistle blows tomorrow—or on the farm.

What attracted prosperity to Xi'an—formerly Chang-an—was the digging of a well. Chang-an, on its own, deserves its unique niche in the annals of mankind. From the eleventh century A.D. it was the capital of eleven dynasties—the Western Zhou, the Qin (Chin), the Western Han, the Sui, and the Tang. In the eighth century, when Chang-an was the capital of the Tang Dynasty, it was probably—with a population of one million—the biggest city on earth! From here, a center of learning, thousands of students from Japan brought Buddhism (itself imported by the monks from India) to China. They also brought home to Nippon the system of writing, the Chinese ideograms, they call kanji. All the relics, pagodas, the belfry and bell tower (dating back to the 14th century Ming Dynasty) are far eclipsed by the discovery in 1974, east of the city of Xi'an, of the vast burial hill concealing the tomb of China's greatest and most notorious Emperor, Qin (Chin) Shihuang, the founder of a Chin (Qin) dynasty that lasted only a few years but transformed China—unified it by the sword, and solidified it by cruelty and cunning.
If the Pharaohs of Egypt had their pyramids with their secrets, Emperor Shih Huang Di had his ghostly army of clay figures, fired in kilns, holding weapons still usable in war. Members of the Yun Zhai Commune digging a series of wells to find water for their fields came upon artifacts, then, exploring deeper discovered a life-sized pottery figure of a warrior buried upright in the earth, some 16 feet underground.

Eager scientists and archaeologists rushing to the scene uncovered more—finally bringing back into the light after two millenniums underground old Shihuangdi’s army set in battle array. The soldiers and their generals were there in full armor, their faces both ferocious and sad, no two countenances alike. There were swordsmen, spearmen, archers and bowmen, cavalry with chariots and horses, in orderly rows to defend the sleeping Emperor. The 8,000 figures uncovered and pieced together thus far are only the beginning. Pits 2 and 3 probably contain many more, and the Emperor’s mausoleum has still to be explored! The army marching out of the mists and mud is a fitting Praetorian guard to the Emperor who the chronicles say “fought millions with thousands of war chariots” and imparted his name—CHIN (QIN)—to China.

Shihuang was not a charming ruler. Born the son of King ZhuangXiang, the King of Qin, in the first month of the lunar year in 259 BC, he was first named Zhao Zheng. His name was subsequently changed to Ying Zheng. His mother had been the beautiful concubine of Lu Buwei, a merchant whom the King met when he was being held hostage in the nearby kingdom of Zhao, before escaping and assuming the throne. In 247 BC, when Ying Zheng (Shihuang) was only 13, his father died. But merchant Lu Buwei took over as regent to dominate the young teenage king and handled the affairs of state with his mother, the Queen. At age 22, Ying Zheng had had enough. He firmly took over the reigns of government. He put down a rebellion led by a servant Lao Ai who had become intimate with his mischievous mother, the Queen. He sent Lu Buwei off into exile, to Sichuan, where the fellow later committed suicide.

Then the King launched a campaign to conquer all the six adjoining states. In 221 BC, after many battles, he had absorbed the states of Qi, Chu, Yan, Han, Zhao and Wei. He divided his new kingdom into 36 prefectures which he ruled with an iron hand. He standardized the systems of weights and measures, reduced handwriting into small Seal
Script and even standardized the width of carriages axles to six feet. His measures centralized politics, the economy, military affairs, and culture. He brooked no dissenting ideology. The eccentric Shihuang came to believe that men should not think or discuss too much, otherwise they would begin to think about and plot revolution. He sent out his men to destroy all ancient records they could find, especially the analects and books of the philosopher Confucius. He once herded over 400 Confucian scholars to the Wei River and had them beheaded or drowned. He buried another 700 scholars alive at the foot of Mount Li. He built an Imperial Road like the Romans did. He erected the Great Wall of China. A builder and destroyer. Need more be said?

September 1, 2005

SHANGHAI—This world, and I don’t mean just surprising Shanghai, is full of surprises. In Urumqi, the now-bustling capital of Muslim-predominant Xinjiang Province in China’s Wild West—the former hub of the famous Silk Road—my wife was surprised when we checked into the city’s most modern hotel, the Yin Du Hotel which proudly banners its five stars on its facade. When she went into the bathroom of our 19th floor executive room, she saw the usual array of cosmetics and powders, i.e., body lotion, shower cap, toothbrushes, detergent—plus two condoms—all in neat boxes sporting the Yin Du hotel colors. I guess this hotel provides male guests with a protective “condom,” but why two condoms daily instead of just one? It’s one of the mysteries, perhaps, of the dessert. This city of 2 million throngs with formerly warlike races, mostly Uygurs of Turkish extraction; fierce Kazakhs, Mongolians, Tatars Xibes and Khalkas. However, twice a day “protection” suggests too vigorous a level of activity. Nonetheless, I was impressed. The Yin Du is obviously prepared for any exigency.

One of them is the fact that America’s former President Bill Clinton is arriving today and checking into the Presidential Suite of the Yin Du (which boasts 14 apartment-suites). People are paying more than $1,000 a plate I hear to attend the dinner at which he’s speaking on the renaissance of the Silk Road. It’s appropriate his caravanserai is our hotel, where full service is provided.
The evening before our departure from Xinjiang (Sinkiang) to Shanghai was gala one. Urumqi’s increasingly impressive city skylines, with newly-erected high rises towering neon lit over old minarets, and advertisements winking in bold colors over storied domes, are of fairly recent vintage. The city has mushroomed with smooth expressways, avenues, and leafy parks only over the past five to six years. Its importance has been enhanced by Xinjiang’s becoming a major artery in the oil pipeline feeding, in prospect, 10 billion cubic meters of oil and gas yearly to the eastern industries of China, such as those in Shanghai.

The other month, Chinese President Hu Jintao went on a state visit to next-door Kazakhztan, which oozes with huge oil reserves, and bought an entire oil company and oil field. Kazakh oil will soon begin pumping via the new pipeline through Xinjiang to the East of the Country. The Silk Road has been converted into the Oil Highway.

Mayor Shokerat Zakir, the Mayor of Urumqi (an Uygur) threw a big party, open-air, for visiting delegates to the world trade fair—us luckily included. The Communist Party Chairman—the real boss of the city, and always a Han (Chinese), Mr. Yanggang Pawty—came to sit with us. We had met the Governor, Simael Tilevarde (an Uygur) at a dinner the night before. Ms. Lei (Chinese), the Economic Development Zone Party Secretary also joined us. Party Secretary Yanggang said that Xinjiang attracts 10 million tourists a year—half a million of them overseas “foreigners”—a fact which ought to put our own Department of Tourism to shame.

Xinjiang, which contains China’s biggest desert, but also soaring snowy mountains and rushing streams, could teach us a few tricks about promoting tourism. In China, everybody pitches in to entertain. They have singing soldiers and singing, dancing policemen, for starters. At lunchtime we were amazed at an entrancing performance sponsored by the People’s Liberation Army. The beautiful ladies who danced, or crooned, and the handsome men who belted out “tartar Toasts” or Kazakh love songs, all had army rank—ranging from sergeant to major.

That same night, at his gala, the Mayor called out his policemen. Lovely girls, each empowered to arrest miscreants or traffic offenders, shucked off their uniforms to perform beguiling folk dances, a police
captain sang in golden baritone a Mongolian love ballad, then a rollicking Tibetan folk song; a major, Pavarotti-style, did a powerful “Che bella cosa” (What a beautiful thing) in flawless Italian. A bunch of school kids did a rousing Mongolian dance, while fiddling away, miming in pantomime how the hordes of their ancestor, Genghis Khan, swept victoriously over Asia. And the toasts flowed freely—in Muslim country, mind you. A good time was had by all.

September 5, 2005

Winging back to Manila from Shanghai ought to have brought on a relieved and exultant shout of “Home Sweet Home!” But home, alas, isn’t sweet. It’s full of ersatz sound and fury signifying nothing but politics, politics, and more politics. Indeed, coming from a dictatorship which is booming economically, one reaches the sad conclusion that we Pinoy and Pinays are giving “democracy” a bad name. I used to write with enthusiasm and fervor, “I wouldn’t have it any other way,” but after years of experience and exasperation, I confess to have reluctantly begun to reconsider the so-called virtues of a “free” Republic. Look at human rights, the defense of which is right. But just consider the hordes of evil men and women who get away with murder, literally, by invoking their human rights, abetted by human rights activists and lawyers. Nobody remembers the rights of the victims, because those unfortunates are no longer breathing and cannot raise a howl. Before I left to spend eight days in China, they were howling about “impeachment.” On my return, I find they’re still engrossed in the “impeachment” struggle. The nation, in the meantime, hasn’t budged an inch in any direction, except that the oil and fuel prices have alarmingly jumped a notch higher. I’m tempted to assert that we’re running on empty, but this isn’t completely true. We’re being propelled by hot air from our nonstop debaters and inveterate media critics. Hot air is good only for balloons, and someday soon somebody will come along to prick our balloon.

Nanjing Road is a prime example of why China, once so drab and backward, has finally made the New Great Leap Forward to Progress. (Mao Zedong’s earlier Great Leap flopped miserably, causing the deaths
of millions from starvation). It was Chairman Deng Xiaoping who saved China, from the disastrous, destructive Red Guards' rampage, and the machinations of the former "Shanghai Gang", known today as the Gang of Four. After the Gang which had been led by Mao's actress wife was toppled and arrested, Deng in the 1980s proclaimed the five modernisms, and steered that vast country towards market "Socialism" while still claiming the supremacy of the Communist Party. He boasted that "to become rich is glorious." The late Deng, born of a poor peasant family in Sichuan on 22 August 1904, declared: "It doesn't matter what color the cat is, as long as it catches mice." He offered Hong Kong and Taiwan the pledge of their keeping their . . uh, capitalistic ways for 50 years if they "returned" to Mother China, under his "One Country, Two Systems" policy. Although he still gets blamed for the June, 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, I don't believe he ordered it. He was by then almost comatose in hospital, but propped-up propaganda-wise to take the rap.

Deng's move to the market economy has boosted China toward becoming the next economic superpower. Nowhere is this more visible than on Shanghai's Nanjing Road, acclaimed as "the first Street in China." Even historically this is true. Nanjing was the first commercial avenue after Shanghai was forced to become an Open Port in 1843 under the Treaty Powers, i.e. Britain, France, Japan and the USA. This, the busiest of Shanghai's thoroughfares, stretches for nearly ten kilometers from The Bund to the Jin'an Temple. Lined with more than 360 grand cinemas, restaurants and shops, Nanjing is visited by over 1.5 million shoppers daily, earning an income more than 2,000 million Yuan annually.

It is a giant pedestrian street for a fourth of the stretch, with more than 500 big department stores. It's a joy to walk along. If you're too tired to walk, you can hop on a little train which goes up and down on rubber wheels, at two Yuan (P14) a ride. On every side are luxury boutiques, upmarket shops, retail centers. On the street are the Sofitel Hotel, the Howard Johnson Plaza, the Ramada Plaza, the East Asia Hotel, the New World Emporium, the Orient Shopping Centre, McDonald's, the "Shanghai Number 1 Dispensary," and Watsons, the ITOKIN department store, an immense Coca Cola Bottle, advertising—what else—Coke, US style, and others. At one corner in the plaza are bronze statues of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Josef Stalin at their Teheran Meeting. There's even, to commemorate the 60th anniversary of China's defeat of Japan, a cluster of bronze statues set up overnight.
One honors Gen. Claire Chennault who led that redoubtable volunteer air force, “The Flying Tigers,” with a bronze replica of a winged Tiger alongside Chennault. One statue has a Chinese 88th route army soldier, brandishing an AK-47, greeting his Soviet counterpart, waving the typical Russian tommy-gun. Another has Venus de Milo—with arms, signalling “Time Out” perhaps for a Yao Ming basketball game. From glorious to glamorous to corny, that’s Nanjing Road. For that matter, that’s Shanghai. Nothing convinced me more vividly than this trip that China is on the march. And that, owing to our ceaseless bickering, we’re in the lurch.

September 6, 2005

Last Wednesday night at 6:30 p.m., one of the finest men I knew, Manuel Juan “Dindo” Gonzalez, quietly passed away at home in New Manila. I thank God I took the opportunity to pay him a visit last Saturday—even if it gave me a shock to see how much our dear Dindo, so handsome, virile, and athletic in his prime, had wasted away. All tired and wan, although still with a sparkle in his eye, he looked up at me and said, even if almost inaudibly, “Max, let’s go on fighting for our country!” God bless you, Dindo! As we pledged each other so long ago, we will go on—inspired by you—struggling as best we can for our people, praying that someday they’ll come under leaders who, like the Biblical flame in the darkness, will lead them to the Promised Land.

Dindo, although a confidante and adviser to presidents, from the late wartime Pres. Jose P. Laurel (although he had spent nine months as a prisoner of the Japanese, tortured by them in Fort Santiago); to Manuel A. Roxas; to Elpidio Quirino; above all to the great Ramon Magsaysay, whom he loved, was half-forgotten in his retirement. But his nationalism and sense of dedication never wavered. A resistance hero, he went on to become one of the nation’s top advertising executives, and Guru of golf in our land. Before the War he commented publicly on sports, specifically on golf, even writing on the subject, postwar, in The Manila Times. His “Golfmate” column appeared as well in the now-defunct Daily Express, Bulletin Today, Business Day, and finally Business World. He also wrote a few articles for us at The Philippine STAR, until he was stricken with cancer.
Dindo played championship golf for more than 60 years and promoted it all his life. He won the Southern Amateur championship in 1941, then, postwar, accumulated over 200 trophies from various tournaments. As their non-playing team Captain, he led the First, Second, Third, and Fourth Philippine Amateur Golf teams to St. Andrews, Scotland (1958), to Merion, Philadelphia (1960), to Kawana, Japan (1962), and Rome, Italy (1964). A member of the Manila Golf Club, Wack Wack, Baguio Golf Club, he played golf regularly, three to four days a week, up until the age of 82. When he died at 88 the other day, the once robust Dindo Gonzalez had grown so frail that one would not have imagined him a topnotch golfer. Now, with one great swing, he's scored that divine Hole-in-One, speeding his ball—with his intrepid soul perched merrily on it—directly to the throne of God, his Father, in Heaven! Of that I can have no doubt.

What I can say is that when Dindo was your friend, he was your faithful friend. He never missed greeting me, would you believe on my birthday—unfailingly I would get a phone call from him, wherever I was on this planet. What an honor it was for me to be remembered so unfailingly by somebody—especially someone like Dindo. The best way I can think of to pay tribute to Dindo Gonzalez is to recount, in this corner, a story he would narrate in his own words about one of his personal heroes. This person had nothing to do with advertising, politics, or with golf. Instead he spoke of his incarceration in Fort Santiago and Bilibid Prison during the Japanese occupation in 1942–1943. The Japanese at the time routinely sent to Fort Santiago for "investigation," and then to Muntinlupa for "trial, sentencing, and execution," anyone they considered suspicious. In March 1942, as the USAFFE resistance in Bataan and Corregidor crumpled in face of the Japanese onslaught, Douglas MacArthur, on orders from the US President, left Corregidor on five PT boats and headed for Australia. Dindo was at the time a Captain and Aide-de-Camp to Gen. Basilio Valdez, the Chief of Staff of the Philippine Armed Forces. He recalls that since "there was no more room in the 5 PT boats" (of which only 3 safely arrived in Australia), he and a contingent of officers were ordered to break through the lines via Ternate and return to Manila.

One afternoon in July, 1942, the Japanese raided Dindo's home in Sta. Mesa and arrested him on charges of spying. Hans Menzi, already an inmate at Fort Santiago supposedly had scribbled Dindo's name on
a list of those "left behind by General Valdez to spy on the Japanese." For five months he remained locked up in Cell no. 6, each day not knowing whether it would be his last. Dindo recalls sharing his cell with E. Rodriguez, Jr. and Maj. Chit Alfonso, as well as others whose names he has now forgotten. Dindo is grateful to Major Alfonso for his frequent advice on how to behave with the Japanese. Because he had followed this advice, Dindo succeeded in skirting the torture so many others at Fort Santiago were being subjected to at the time. As it happened, he was "only occasionally beaten on the head and became partially deaf as a consequence." He remembers receiving a smuggled photograph of his first son, Ricky, born in November of that year. It was the highlight of an otherwise dreary and often horrifying existence in a damp cell, whose inmates were fed twice daily with a handful of spoiled rice and kangkong.

There were in fact many notables who were incarcerated by the Japanese in Fort Santiago at the time. Some were released early, some later; others never heard from again. One Ferdinand Marcos was arrested and jailed in Fort Santiago. But he stayed for only one day, as many of the inmates at the time would attest. Dindo spoke of being in the company of an almost totally unknown boy who became an inspiration to the inmates of Fort Santiago. What follows is his account of Gonzales, in his own words:

His name was Carlos Santiago Malonso, a 17-year-old Filipino who showed both the prisoners and the Japanese what real courage was about. Malonso had been the announcer in the Voice of Freedom, a radio station transmitting from Corregidor at the time. He identified himself over the radio as "Juan de la Cruz." Broadcast(ed) three times daily, Juan de la Cruz' programs were closely monitored by the Underground. It usually opened with the U.S. and Philippine national anthems, followed by encouraging news about the war's progress, including the Japanese losses incurred elsewhere in the Pacific, followed by a short commentary on the need to resist the invaders, and closing usually with an offer of 50 bottles of beer to anyone who would capture the Japanese Commander-in-Chief, dead or alive. The last part was particularly insulting to the Japanese who must have found the idea totally galling and impertinent.
When Corregidor fell, the Voice of Freedom continued to broadcast from underground. But despite the many ingenious ways of relocating the transmitter to avoid detection, the Japanese eventually triangulated and captured the clandestine group. In his last broadcast, an agitated Juan de la Cruz announced that their equipment which had been mounted on a calesa had become the target of the enemy he could see closing in. Then, against a background of rapid gunfire, Malonso chocked a last goodbye and the station went off the air. Arrested with him were Oscar Arellano who wrote the program scripts and Antonio San Juan who built and maintained the transmitter. The date was July 9, 1942.

Only five days earlier Carlos Santiago Malonso had married 16-year-old Violeta Brown. Carlos was 17 at the time, turning 18 only later that year in Fort Santiago. Following a few months of courtship, they decided to marry on July 4th, Independence Day. On July 9, 1942, after only 5 days of marriage, Malonso was arrested. Four days later, on July 13, Violeta herself was arrested and sent also to Fort Santiago. In a recent interview, Violeta Brown Malonso recalls the following incident as vividly “as if it happened only yesterday”: “At first the Japanese could not believe that the manly, authoritative radio voice of Juan de la Cruz was that of 17-year-old Carlos. But when they were finally convinced that Malonso was in fact Juan de la Cruz, the Japanese gathered many inmates, including Malonso and his wife, in a large room where Malonso was publicly asked to choose between two flags—the US and Japanese—laid on a table. They informed all present that if the Japanese flag was chosen, Malonso and all his companions, including his wife, would be set free. If, however, he chose the other flag, then he knew what would happen to him. Malonso defiantly said, “Yes, I know.”

The Japanese naturally wanted to demonstrate to the inmates that the impressive radio voice of Juan de la Cruz belonged, not to a brave man, but to a wimp concerned only with securing his own release. As Violeta recounts it, a few moments elapsed before he made known his choice, which is understandable considering that in the balance were his wife’s and friends’ lives, plus every principle he had espoused for so
long, and all in exchange for the Japanese flag. After what seemed like an eternity, Carlos walked to the table and to everyone’s surprise picked up the Japanese Flag. But before a smirk could appear on the faces of their Japanese captors, Carlos crumpled the Japanese flag between his palms, flung it to the ground, and trampled upon it. The infuriated Japanese right there and then, in everyone’s presence, bayonetedit him in various parts of his body, although avoided his torso, which allowed him eventually to more efficiently recover from his wounds. But as soon as he was well enough, the Japanese resumed their daily interrogation of him, and their regimen of beatings, all designed to break his will. Malonso had become the symbol of resistance within the inmate community; he needed to be broken.

At the earliest hour each day they would take Carlos from his cell, and throw him back in his cell in the afternoon. Often he arrived as one bloody mess, “black and blue where he was not bloody, and full of cuts and welts.” Often they returned him to his cell hardly breathing, yet able to barely smile. “He would sneer at this guards gesturing at them in defiance calculated to infuriate.” The almost daily torture designed to break him became so horrific that time and again his fellow inmates cried out of pity and frustration over their inability to stop the inhuman treatment of the young, but brave boy. The Japanese tried hard to have him retract in order to show their superiority and dominance. Instead Carlos Malonso became the inspiration and sterling example of valor and defiance within Fort Santiago.

Late in 1942, Dindo and a number of other inmates including Malonso, were transferred to Bilibid Prison in Muntinlupa for trial. This time Dindo shared his cell with a number of officers including then Admiral Santiago Nuval. Two cells away was Eulogio “Amang” Rodriguez, Sr., later to become Senate President of the Philippines. Dindo related two events that occurred during his three months in Bilibid Prison: one had to do again with Carlos Malonso, and the other with golf and how the game led to his (Dindo’s) eventual release from prison. The first incident involved a photograph presented during Dindo’s trial. A few years before the war, while in Japan with Larry Montes for a tournament, he met and was photographed with Butch Inoye, a member of the Princeton Golf team and son of Sheichi Inoye, Japan’s Prime Minister before Tojo. During their raid of Dindo’s house in July 1942, the Japanese had come upon the photograph and now discussed it during the trial.
It is one of the vagaries of life that the two subjects in that picture met entirely different fates. Butch Inoye, was later captured by the Russians in Manchuria and never heard from again, while Dindo Gonzalez was released by Inoye’s military compatriots on grounds that someone who fraternized with the son of Japan’s former Prime Minister could not possibly be a spy. At last Dindo was free and could return home to his family. At home and resting, Dindo recalled the final days of Carlos Malonso—in particular, an incident that became indelibly seared in his memory.

One evening in February, Malonso was again called to stand before the Japanese authorities in the presence of almost all the inmates. The prison commander loudly informed Malonso that this was his “one last chance” to take back what he had previously said about the Japanese Imperial Army. If he retracted, he would be released “at once, now.” But if he still refused, he would be executed. Defiant to the end, Malonso answered that he would never retract and that if he had a chance to do it again, he would. Everyone knew that answer would spell his doom. The Japanese commandant replied, “So... you have made your choice. But I salute you... courageous Filipino.” The commandant then actually saluted Malonso and it is said that many of the onlookers reflexibly stood proudly upright, but with tears in their eyes. On the evening of November 1, 1942, Carlos Malonso is reported by his fellow inmates to have said, “They are going to execute me soon. Remember if your time comes, show no fear. Never give them satisfaction. Die with pride. Die with dignity.” The next morning at 5 a.m. Carlos Malonso was beheaded. His body was never found.

February 10, 2006

What's happening in Pasig City, right in the heart of Metro Manila? With Police Precinct 20 and Eastern Police District headquarters not far away, an empire of shabu was operating openly and insolently, not even bothering to conceal its existence. When a special Philippine National Police team (not from the area) raided the cluster of drug dens right inside a warren of shanties, they caught 300 persons, including fifty women and children “customers” in the shabu supermarket complex!
Don't tell us the cross-eyed cops in the immediate neighborhood, or the EPD's antinarcotics police officers didn't know what was going on right under their very noses. As PNP Director General Art Lomibao exclaimed: "This is incomprehensible. Mahirap paniwalaan!" You bet. According to the "whistle blower" who deserves all the reward money he can get, the drug den had been operating for more than two years. How can the local police explain that? Remember, this is no ordinary crime we're talking about—it's a heinous crime, punishable by death. Oh well. Nobody gets "executed" in this country anymore, thanks to the wishy-washy policy of President GMA who wants to please the Bishops and the European Union. Capital punishment in this country is a joke because it's no longer implemented. The 2,000 congesting Death Row, probably, will only die of old age—or manage to escape.

If you ask me, it's not just Pasig City Police Chief, Senior Supt. Raul Medina who must answer for the existence of the drug tiangge, within sniffing distance of the neighborhood Police Station. The rot has to go higher up. As for Pasig Mayor Vicente Eusebio, I saw him on television threatening to kick out those squatters in whose "homes" the shabu market-market flourished and send them back to the provinces. What about the city officials who were deaf, dumb and blind? The shabu super-tiangge wasn't far from City Hall either. Everything seems to be happening in Pasig these days. Only last week there was the ULTRA stampede tragedy in which 74 died and hundreds were injured. It's not just the fault of ABS-CBN's "security" people and the mismanagement of the organizers of that ill-fated "Wowowee" event. The police were as much to blame, too, for their lack of enough police presence and their abject failure at crowd control. And where were the Mayor and his City Hall staffers when such a big mob threatened to spin out of control? The murder of a former Congressman in a restaurant there hasn't been solved either, if you'll recall.

It was a delight to meet three energetic and brilliant new Ambassadors in a row. First there was Pakistan's new envoy, H.E. Muhammad Naeem Khan, who is both articulate and enthusiastic, and a man of varied experience, from having been Spokesman of the Foreign Ministry to having served in the "fun" capitals of Madrid (Spain), San'a (Yemen), Washington DC, and Beijing. Next there was the remarkably erudite and voluble new envoy from the Republic of Panama, Ambassador Juan Felipe Pitty. It was not only informative but entertaining to discuss a wealth of topics with this tall, well-
built gentleman who spoke his native Spanish with a flourish, but, most of all, English in perfect American idiom since he had earned his Master's (LL.M.) majoring in Admiralty Law from the renowned Tulane University in New Orleans (Louisiana)—of course long before the Big Easy had been inundated by Hurricane Katrina. Ambassador Pitty went to Tulane on an American Waterway Operators Scholarship and was elected president of the Tulane Maritime Law Society (1994). His graduated thesis was graded with the “highest honors” when he earned his Law Degree in 1993 from the Universidad Santa Maria La Antigua in Panama. He was a practising lawyer, as attorney-partner in his own law firm, Pitty y Asociados. Indeed, he was President of the Maritime Law Commission and the National Bar Association (2003–2004). Panama’s “fame” comes, naturally, from the vital Panama Canal which is under that Republic’s control, having taken it over from the United States when the Canal Zone was “returned” to the Republic. But more important to us than that aspect is that—in case you didn’t know it—Panama maintains the largest merchant marine fleet in the world. Approximately three out of every ten ships worldwide fly the Panamanian flag! More importantly, over 200,000 Filipino men and women sail the seas on Panamanian merchant vessels. They comprise the majority of the 300,000 officers and crew members on these ships.

Finally, the new Indonesian Ambassador, Prof. Irzan Tandjung, called on this publisher last Friday and he was absolutely charming and simpatico. Truly sama sama, to put it in Bahasa Indonesia. The past few envoys from Jakarta had either been Admirals or Generals, with a military background—from the Angkata Bersandjata Republic Indonesia (ABRI) or the Tentara Nasional Indonesia (TNI). This time, Ambassador Tandjung is an economist, one trained in the United States—with a Doctorate in Economic Sciences from the University of Illinois in Urbana, Champaign in 1987, from the same Institution in 1981, got a Master of Science degree. He also obtained a Master of Arts in Economic Sciences from Syracuse University in upstate New York. His Bachelor of Economics, of course, came from the University of Indonesia in Jakarta. What's more is that Dr. Tandjung, a Batak born in Medan in 1937, is a Christian—a Presbyterian. When I was covering Indonesia in the old days, the Batak were all great singers and intrepid fellows. The late Defense Minister, Gen. Abdul Harris Nasution, who might have become President (following his escape from murder
by the Tjabirawa and the Partai Komunis Indonesia during the 1965 Gestapu coup), was both a Batak and a Christian himself. Another Christian had been Vice-President and Economics Minister Adam Malik, my old friend who died of cancer many years ago. Indeed, in spite of the fact that Indonesia, with 220 million people, is the biggest Muslim nation on earth, many Christians have risen to high office in that country, whose motto is emblazoned on its Republican seal, the Eagle: “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika”(Unity Out of Diversity). We are happy that the new crop of envoys—Tandjung for one amazed that within days of his arrival he was able to present his credentials to President GMA, when it usually takes weeks of waiting—are both upbeat about our country, and eager to get to know us. We bid them Bienvenidos and Salamat Datang!

February 12, 2006

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A daily newspaper said yesterday that with less than two weeks before the twentieth anniversary of EDSA “People Power” 1, our stand at the barricades in February 1986, former President Fidel V. Ramos (FVR) was “irked” to see that no tangible preparations had been made by the GMA government for this “special celebration.” The report quoted FVR as saying this is “deplorable.” I can’t say I blame General Ramos (ret.) for his sulk. EDSA ONE was his moment of glory. He took a stand there, first in Camp Aguinaldo (with Juan Ponce Enrile), then in Camp Crame. We were the guys and gals out there on the sidewalk and the street, massed at the barricades to “protect” him and the brave few members of the military (Gringo and Company, and others) from the anticipated attack of Marcos forces.

If you ask me, we’ve celebrated our “courageous” stand at EDSA 1986 often enough—in fact, too often. Sure, “People Power” was nice. The world stood up and applauded; we as a people had recovered our dignity and pride. An oppressed nation had sundered its chains, spat the Dictator in the eye and (with the help of US helicopters) had forced him to flee to Hawaii—not Paoay. How we felt, after the long night of tyranny and pillage, can be capsulized by the expression: We stood triumphant on the tallest mountain peak, on a blue sky day, and, as it’s said, “on
a clear day you can see forever.” Alas, the heading euphoria of victory faded all too soon. The Revolution faltered. As a cynic once put it: “Eventually, every revolution evaporates, leaving behind it only the slime of a new bureaucracy.” This, sad to say is what happened, post-Revolution, with the Cory administration. St. Cory, perhaps, remained Immaculate; many of her minions did not.

The truth is that I have not gone to any EDSA celebration. My view, which I know was shared by many thousands who never “returned” for the hoopla and the vaudeville, was that we were there when it mattered. We stood our ground before the tanks, armored cars, the tear gas, and the massed Marine bayonets. We prayed to God, to Mother Mary, we praised the Lord, and asked the armed forces to join us in our effort, which they did in the end. For all these we are forever thankful—and proud.

But to commemorate such an event with a fiesta every year would have replaced that honest pride in what we did with conceit. It was time to get back to work instead. In fact, with every passing year, we saw too many Marcos loyalists parading on the EDSA grandstand as if they had been EDSA heroes and heroines instead of collaborators—just as there were tens of thousands of fake “guerrillas” after the war, eager to collect “backpay” and decorations when so many of them had been KALIBAPI and collaborators of the Japanese.

Don’t get me wrong. We honor EDSA’s “People Power” 1986. We are grateful to have been part of it. In even stronger measure we honor “The Spirit of 1986,” the freedom marches, speeches, and the anti-Conjugal Dictatorship fight waged all over the Philippines, from Aparri, to Cebu (especially), to Zamboanga. Commemorating EDSA alone, alas, ignores the many more all over our archipelago who, in increasing acts of defiance, contributed to the downfall of the Marcos hegemony. The best way to celebrate EDSA is for our people to power themselves back to work—and to pray, quietly, in thanksgiving. Ora et Labora!

Another commemoration will be held this Saturday (18 February) at the Memorare monument in Intramuros at Plazade Santa Isabel. The rites will mark the sixty-first anniversary of the Battle for the Liberation of Manila. What’s significant is that Japan’s Ambassador, His Excellency Ryuichiro Yamazaki, will lay a wreath at the monument and make a public apology for the “heinous behavior of the Japanese Imperial Forces in Manila.” These are the words relayed to this writer by former Ambassador Juan Jose P. Rocha, president of Memorare Manila.
Indeed, I greatly admire our friend Ambassador Yamazaki, one of the most voluble and brilliant envoys Tokyo has sent to us in the past half century after the war. He said “sorry” in Bataan, he’s apologized for Japanese misconduct during the war on every public occasion. Strangely, the Japanese who live in a society in which the words, “gomen nasai (So Sorry) are invoked at least twenty times a day by every individual in routine interaction, were for decades decidedly reluctant to apologize for the atrocities and bullying of their Imperial Forces during World War II.

A thought intrudes. In commemorating the Liberation of Manila, perhaps the Americans might do well to “apologize” too. They bombed, shelled, and flattened buildings and churches (obliterating some of our most beautiful in Intramuros, our lost Spanish heritage) days after the Japanese Marines had evacuated those battered areas. The Americans did so, probably, without malice. It’s just the good old American way. I saw this when covering the Vietnam war, and the fighting in Cambodia. The Americans shelled, napalmed, helicopter gunship-rocketed everything in the frenzy and heat of combat. Many of their own men were, in fact, slain by “friendly fire.”

Everyone ought to read a book entitled The Battle for Manila by Richard Connaughton, John Pimlott and Duncan Anderson (Bloomsbury, London, 1995). Connaughton had served for many years with the British Army in Europe, Australia and the Far East, and was subsequently the British Army’s Head of Defence Studies. He has a Masters in Philosophy from Cambridge University and has authored several books on the war. For his part, Duncan Anderson was a senior lecturer in the War Studies Department at Sandhurst (Britain’s equivalent of our Philippine Military Academy and West Point). He holds a Doctorate from Oxford University. Brought up in Brisbane, Australia, Gen. Douglas MacArthur’s center of operations from 1942 to 1944, Anderson spent years studying and writing about MacArthur’s career. The three authors spent over a year researching the book. The volume recounts how, between February and March 1945, vindicating his pledge of “I shall return,” General MacArthur and his forces fought to “liberate” the city. In the flyleaf, the authors say: “By the first week of March, the “Pearl of the Orient” (as Manila used to be called) was no more: only a handful of blackened, smoking ruins interrupted the now startlingly clear view from one edge of the city to the other. Casualties had been heavy: 6,500 Americans, up to 20,000 Japanese—most of them dead—and more than 200,000 of Manila’s own citizens...The destruction of Manila was on a par with the
destruction of Warsaw.” On the back cover of the book’s dust jacket was the blurb, over a grim photograph of ruined, shell-shattered, scorched Manila: “Liberation or Destruction? The shocking truth about what really happened when General MacArthur returned....”

Here’s how I reported it myself many years ago:

The Americans landed 200,000 strong on Luzon, in Lingayen Beach, on 9 January 1945—more than three years after the Fall of Bataan and Corregidor, Lt. Gen. Walter Krueger’s Sixth Army, Major General Innis Swift’s I Corp. and Major General Oscar Griswold’s XIV, stormed ashore virtually unopposed. Later, the course was to get bloodier and more vicious. Lt. Gen. Tomoyuki Yamashita, the “Tiger of Malaya,” commanding the Japanese forces had moved most of his units north, preparing only a last-ditch defense of Corregidor. He had ordered Manila abandoned as an “open city.” His orders must have gone astray, because Rear Admiral Sanji Iwabuchi, with 30,000 Japanese sailors and marines, immediately reoccupied the capital under instructions from Vice Admiral Denshichi Okochi. (This was to prove Yamashita’s undoing, for he was later to pay for the mistake.)

On 27 January 1945, the First Cavalry Division arrived and got a terse directive from the chief. They were to race to Manila to rescue 3,400 American internees and prisoners of war before their captors could kill them. “Go around the Japs, bounce off the Japs, save your men, but get to Manila! Free the internees at Santo Tomas! Take Malacañang and the legislative buildings!” The First Cavalry got going, supported from above by Marine dive-bombers. The Eleventh Airborne Division landed south of Manila, and began to slog its way toward the city. A corps was landed on Subic Bay, on the west coast above Bataan—a dress rehearsal for MacArthur’s later—much later—Inchon landing.

Everything seemed to go well at first. With a brilliant and lightning thrust, MacArthur landed a regiment of paratroops on Topside in Corregidor, while an infantry battalion made an amphibious assault on Bottomside. Some 5,200 Japanese fought a ten-day battle for the Rock, but in the end the cornered enemy commander retreated to Malinta Tunnel and the trapped detachment of 4,000 Japanese hold-outs blew themselves up in a blaze of hara-kiri by igniting tons of explosives. There were only 50 survivors.

On 2 March, General MacArthur led his “Bataan Gang” back to the Rock by PT boat, in the reverse manner he had left it in flight in 1942. Col. George M. Jones, the commander of the assault troops saluted him
smartly as he stepped ashore: "Sir, I present to you Fortress Corregidor." The General, pinning a Distinguished Service Cross on his shirt, declared: "I see that the old flag-pole still stands. Have your troops hoist the colors to its peak, and let no enemy ever haul them down."

Then, in that dramatic turn of phrase for which he is famous, he paid tribute to the brave, four-month ordeal of the original Filipino-American defenders: "Its long protracted struggle enabled the Allies to gather strength. Had it not held out, Australia would have fallen, with incalculably disastrous results. Our triumphs today belong to that dead army."

MacArthur hoped to "liberate" Manila on 26 January, his sixty-fifth birthday. But it was not to be. On 4 February, tank-led units crashed into the University of Santo Tomas compound, saving at least the American detainees, and those held captive in the Old Bilibid prison. At Santo Tomas, MacArthur was surrounded by masses of sobbing, gaunt-eyed men. In the Bilibid compound many of the men tried to stand erect though at inspection greeted their old Commander in silence. "As I passed slowly down the scrawny, suffering column, a murmur accompanied me as each man barely speaking above a whisper, said, 'You're back, or 'you made it.'" MacArthur recalled afterward. "I could only reply, 'I'm a little bit late, but we finally came.'"

For scores of thousands of Filipinos—men, women, and children—held hostage in the south of Manila's Pasig River, it was too late. The Japanese indulged in an orgy of rape and murder—throwing hand-grenades into houses and air-raid shelters where refugees huddled, herding hapless civilians into buildings and setting them ablaze, bayoneting and beheading the rest. Patients in hospitals were strapped to their beds, and the hospitals put to the torch. Hundreds of women were dragged into the old Bayview Hotel near the Luneta and raped, then brutally killed. Men were hooted and given the coup de grace with the katana, the Samurai sword, or simply gunned down. Not content with sexual assault, the ferocious sailors and marines carved women's breasts off with knife or bayonet. Babies' and children's eyes were gouged out, or their heads bashed against walls. Entire districts like Ermita, Malate, Paco, Singalong died. Neither quarter nor mercy was given. All in all, more than 150,000 Filipino civilians were slaughtered.

In the end the Americans had to fight for each inch of the ground, house to house, building to building, stairwell to stairwell. In a final frenzy of destruction, MacArthur's artillery was forced to pound the city,
reducing the ancient Walled City of Intramuros, with its centuries-old Spanish churches and magnificent Cathedral, its colonial mansions and palaces, into rubble to root out the stubbornly-entrenched Japanese.

One eyewitness tells us that he came upon a detachment of artillery on Sta. Mesa Heights smashing the Walled City to dust with wild abandon, almost in glee. “Stop! Stop!” he cried out to the captain supervising the cannonade. “There can’t be any more Japs left alive down there—and what about the civilians?” The captain looked at him incredulously. “Mister,” he answered. “We’ve lugged these guns all the way across the Pacific, and by God we’re going to use them. Do you expect to bring these shells all the way back home?”

Historian William Manchester was to write: “The devastation of Manila was one of the great tragedies of World War II. Of Allied cities in those war years, only Warsaw suffered more. Seventy percent of the utilities, 75 percent of the factories, 80 percent of the southern residential district, and 100 percent of the business district were razed.”

February 14, 2006

Yesterday, some 600 Muslims staged a noisy rally in Makati to “angrily” register their protest, as has become fashionable throughout the Islamic world, against cartoons originally published last September—or almost five months ago—in Jyllands-Posten, an obscure Danish newspaper. The cartoons (were they four, five, or six?), would have gone unnoticed, until imams began spreading the “word” on them, with war-scare type television reports (notably CNN, BBC, and Arab networks such as Al Jazeera), stoking the controversy. In any event, since we are a predominantly Christian (even Catholic country), yesterday’s rally did not spin out of control, with our riot police even looking bemused as a small crowd of hyped-up protesters burned several Danish flags (probably manufactured in China, like everything else these days), chanting Allahu Akbar (“God is great!”) as they did, and threatening, between obscenities hurled at Demark,”behead those who insult Islam!” Considering that Islam professes to be a religion of “peace” (with Allah described as “the all-compassionate, and all-merciful”), I must say their all-too-evident enthusiasm for separating people from their heads seemed to me a bit curious. Betcha most, if not all, of yesterday’s Muslim
protesters never saw those offensive cartoons that, according to reports, not only violated the ban on representations of the Prophet Muhammad, but also, by depicting him as ill-concealing a bomb in his turban, invited the inference that Islam should be equated with "terrorism." By golly, granted that many of this world’s suicide bombers happen by some strange coincidence to be Muslim, is that any reason to "profile" all Muslims as potential terrorists. (Admittedly, we Catholics have had our share of terrorists from the now-almost-defunct Irish Republican Army, or IRA, in Northern Ireland, and the Basque ETA terrorists from Euskadi/Vizcaya, Spain).

There’s no doubt it is not a good idea, in fact it’s not nice, to ridicule others’ religious beliefs. But for heaven’s sake, the cartoonist who drew those “offensive” cartoons (others being brandished were apparently "fakes" inserted by agitators to inflame more Muslims) was expressing his own view—as a cartoonist. Still, the wave of fury that those cartoons have unleashed continues to escalate, with dozens of people from Afghanistan to Pakistan killed over them, say by police officers seeking to disperse the crowds of fanatics that had gathered for an attack on a group of Norwegian peacekeeping troops in Afghanistan; a British army unit had to be dispatched to “rescue” the besieged Norwegians, whose only “crime” had been that a small newspaper in Norway had reprinted one of the cartoons in a show of “sympathy” for their Danish counterparts, and to stress the point that newspapers in free countries are entitled to freedom of speech. So instead of being ignored, as they might have been had the Jyllands-Posten been simply left alone, these cartoons have even multiplied in the Western media. It is known to me as a newspaper publisher that newspapers often end up in the wet market the next day, to wrap up fish with, or in homes that do not use plastic with which to line garbage bins. Some of the cartoons even ended up getting reprinted by Die Welt (The World), which belongs to the powerful Axel Springer Empire in Germany; by France Soir, a small Paris daily that immediately doubled its circulation (although the offending editor got sacked); and by other heavier-hitters such as the left-leaning Le Monde (The World), Liberation, and other Western dailies. Angry Muslims are calling a jihad not only against Denmark, but also Sweden and Norway and even Christians in general (as they did in Lebanon, where a shaky truce—following a bloody civil war that raged for fifteen years—just barely holds between Sunni and Shia Muslims, Christians, Druses and other factions). Imagine that: overreaction to those obscure
Danish cartoons might even reignite a civil war in Lebanon, and raze Beirut once again. Isn’t that the height of absurdity?

Muslim leaders have been demanding that Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen and the Danish government apologize for the cartoons and the “insult” to the Prophet. But they’re trying to bully, I’ll have to say, the wrong man. The 53-year-old Rasmussen, who was elected in 2001, is a toughie. His center-right coalition, Financial Times correspondent Paivi Munter reports from Copenhagen, built its program on two platforms: a tax freeze and strict restriction on immigration. In a tiny kingdom of 5.8 million Danes, the ethnic population already feels uneasy about 200,000 Muslim immigrants living and working in their midst—now the Genie of resentment has been released from its bottle. Rasmussen’s ratings remain above 50 percent, way above that of any opposition leader. He knows he’s got the backing of the Danish people. And the Danes, for all their peculiarities, are a tough people: during World War II, while other Nazi-occupied countries collaborated (hence the derogatory term, “Quislings”), the Danes stubbornly protected their country’s Jewish minority and smuggled many Jews out of their country to enable them to escape being herded into Adolf Hitler’s concentration camps like the hell-holes of Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Klooga, and Bergen-Belsen.

I’m not overly fond of the Danes, who tend to be cold fish, even though I’m a devotee of their greatest storyteller, Hans Christian Andersen (who looks like Danny Kaye), and their fun park Tivoli, which was the inspiration for Disneyland. In my younger days, we used to bang those beer steins, or quafe aquavit Aalborg by the bottle, and belt out Wonderful, Wonderful Copenhagen with gusto. And we know that the Danes, like their fellow Norsemen, the Norwegians and Swedes, before they became dour Lutheran Christians, were lusty Vikings, the terror and scourge of Christian Europe, the defilers of monasteries, and the looters and pillagers who ranged from England, to Normandy, to Paris—and even through Russia. (The name Russia came from the Rus, a tribe of Viking invaders).

But all that aside, why on earth should Rasmussen and the Danish nation “apologize” to the Muslim world for what a cartoonist in one of their small newspapers did? Can you imagine our Emperadora, GMA, apologizing to the world for a cartoon in the Philippine Star or, horrors, the Philippine Daily Inquirer? Surely not. Even Senate Pres. Franklin Drilon, who wants to oust GMA, would not be silly enough to demand
this. I think it’s time everyone lightened up. Those Muslim protesters and demonstrators have had their say. Let’s cool off, and forget the whole issue. The Prophet is too great to have been mortally insulted by a mere cartoon, or even six cartoons. Burning down Embassies, Danish flags, and other forms of violence are, in themselves, an insult to the Islamic faith, which as they say, proclaims “peace.” End this funny *jihad*. Peace be upon all of us!

If Christians wished to make a point of it, the Muslim protesters who’re burning Danish flags are insulting Jesus Christ and Christianity even more directly. If you’ll notice, the *white cross* on the Danish flag is our Christian symbol. It was adopted by the Danes, tradition says, when the flag with a white cross on a red background fell from heaven during a battle between the Danes and the Estonians (from the Baltic) almost eight centuries ago. This was regarded, legend has it, as a sign from God—and it inspired the Danish warriors to victory. Indeed, Danish news media have begun to refer to the Islamic attacks on their flag, and the burning of the “cross,” as a blasphemy, too, and a sacrilege on that sacred Christian symbol. (Come to think of it, every Nordic flag, including those of Sweden and Norway, bears the Cross). Anyway if you want to know, Lutheran and other Protestant Christians, and Catholics, used to wage war against each other in the old days. The population of Germany was even reduced in half in the bitter wars between Catholics and Protestants. This just goes to show that wars of religion are bloody—and, in the end, essentially stupid.

Oh well. Denmark has become one of the most secular countries in Europe, the very opposite of “religious.” A statistic says only 3 percent of Danes attend church once a week. By all means, angry Muslims can boycott Danish butter, other Danish products, and even *Lego* if they wish. Surely, they don’t drink *Heineken* or any Danish beer, anyway; but enough of those violent demonstrations, all over a bunch of cartoons.

February 16, 2006

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It was a joy to learn that the topnotcher in this year’s graduating class of the Philippine Military Academy (PMA), First Class Cadet Ariel Toledo, 25, comes from our hometown of Sto. Domingo,
Ilocos Sur. This means that young Toledo will lead the rest of his 325 classmates in the PMA “Mandala” Class of 2006 and be commissioned a Second Lieutenant in the Philippine Air Force. He hails from one of our barrios, Sitio Lussuac, and his inspiring young life has already been reported in yesterday’s newspapers. At the commencement rites in Fort Del Pilar in Baguio City he will be receiving the Presidential Saber, The PMA Award for Excellence, and the Philippine Air Force Saber from President Macapagal Arroyo.

Toledo’s performance at the PMA demonstrates to us anew that the backbone of our country’s strength lies in our little towns in which idealism and optimism in the pursuit of excellence has not yet been stifled by the cynicism that has come to pervade too many of our urban communities. From childhood it had been Toledo’s dream to become a soldier, and he had pursued this step by step, by first joining the Cub Scouts and the Boy Scouts. I’ve always believed that the Boy Scouts (and for women, the Girl Scouts) are the greatest builders of self-reliance, concern for others, self-discipline, and endurance among our young.

Notice that the first letter of Toledo’s name is typical of most Sto. Domingo surnames, which start with a T. The Spanish priests who had originally been assigned to baptize the flock obviously had picked a letter of the alphabet for the names of the faithful in each town within the archdiocese of Nueva Caceres. Thus, most people in Sto. Domingo carry surnames like Tadena, Tadique, Tesoro, Torralba, Tagorda, and so forth. Our surname of Soliven and my mother’s maiden name of Villaflor (both mom and dad came from Sto. Domingo) were among the exceptions.

In fact, our small town of less than 50,000 inhabitants has produced many of the leaders of Ilocos Sur. Most of the congressmen representing the First District of the province, indeed, have come from our town. In the old days, leadership in the province came exclusively from Vigan, the capital (originally founded by the Conquistador Juan Salcedo as Ciudad Fernandina). The Vigan folk dominated the province, considering themselves the best educated, the handsomest and, of course, the richest. It was papa who had broken the ice by challenging Vigan’s dominance in this field. He graduated with a degree in Law from the University of the Philippines and engaged in law practice in Ilocos Sur. But soon growing tired of being paid for his legal services in vegetables, rice, corn, chicken, and other commodities, he felt that he might be more useful in serving the province as a Diputado in the House of Representatives. “You can’t
beat the guys from Vigan,” his friends kidded him. To which my father said, “Just watch me!” Oratory helped him win. Having been trained by the Spanish and Filipino Jesuits of the Ateneo in their seminary in Vigan, he was fluent in both Spanish and Ilocano but had learned English only when he went to UP in Manila. There, however, he had diligently striven to improve his “Bamboo English,” as his classmates had scoffed at him at his probinsyano (provincial) accent. Perfecting his rhetorical skills, he had won the Quezon Gold Medal for Oratory in his final year in the State University.

Papa was a spellbinder on the entablado (stage) and soon had people coming from miles away just to listen to him. His argument was that a small town “boy” was just as good as any Vigan grandee. “Don’t we put on our pants in the same way? Or wear our shirts in the same way? Are our brains smaller than theirs?” He would jest on the platform. One of his campaign managers, Leon Pichay, had devised a catchy campaign song, “Hymno Soliven” fitting the lyrics to the rousing revolutionary tune, “Alerta Katipunan”. Whenever the band started batting out that tune, the audience began applauding. He jumped over fences and conducted a person to person campaign, in a manner to be perfected by one Diosdado Macapagal many years later. Borne on the crest of almost total support from the small towns of the First District, he was swept into Congress.

He used the same tactics when he ran for a second term, this time for the National Assembly. In this campaign he defeated former Interior Secretary Elpidio Quirino by a landslide, virtually two to one. Apo Pidiong, of course, went on to become President of the Philippines years after my father died in 1943. Since then, most of our First District Congressmen have come from Sto. Domingo. First, there was Congressman Faustino Tobia. Recently, we had former Congressman Mariano Tajon. At present, on his second term, is my cousin, Congressman Salacnib Baterina.

March 17, 2006

Yesterday, the family gathered for Mass at our home, celebrated by my nephew, Fr. Luis S. David, S.J. It was a reminder to me that the most important resource of the Filipino people is the family. We keep
on bragging about our eight million OFWs, the hardworking and enterprising overseas Filipino workers, laboring in the foreign diaspora, from the burning deserts of Saudi Arabia and its oil fields to the frozen wastes of the Arctic, or sailing the Seven Seas aboard thousands of merchant ships, bulk carriers, and supertankers, in order to send home to their families no less than $13.6 billion a year. As has been said endlessly, this substantial sum is what helps keep our economy afloat. There is a reverse side to the coin however. The tragedy of our OFW phenomenon is that too often families are separated, living far apart from each other, which sometimes leads to dysfunction. This is the hidden cost of our people having to go abroad to earn enough to send children to school, keep a roof over the heads of their loved ones, and otherwise support the folks at home. Yet, judging from many who access our megaportal, philstar.com, or tune in to The Filipino Channel and a similar service of GMA-7, it's clear that wherever they are the thoughts of our overseas workers invariably turn to home.

However, that is not the point of this column, no matter how heart-warming the idea of the Filipino family being the bedrock underpinning of our nation may be. What struck me during yesterday's Mass was the Gospel according to St. John, the Evangelist. Father David elaborated on it eloquently in his homily but the powerful message of Evangelist requires no embellishment.

The Gospel narrated, "Since the Passover of the Jews was near, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. He found in the temple area those who sold oxen, sheep, and doves, as well as the money changers seated there. He made a whip out of cords and drove them all out of the temple area, with the sheep, oxen, and spilled the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, 'Take these out of here, and stop making my Father's house a marketplace.'"

Jesus was the Son of God and it's hard to imagine that the Messiah, sent here to redeem Man, could lose his temper. But Jesus did on that day. What must have outraged him was the materialism and greed that had invaded the temple premises. I especially liked the portion in which he whipped the money changers out, spilling their coins. This is not to condemn those who handle money-changer booths today in the right places. Jesus, contrary to the stampita showing a gentle Christ, must have been a powerful man, a carpenter like his father, St. Joseph, whose feast was celebrated yesterday. Otherwise, the mercenary stall holders would not have fled from his wrath. The Gospel story is surely
a reminder to us that materialism and avarice, like that which pervades too much of our society, is anathema to the Lord.

I'm glad to observe that our Catholic bishops, despite the taunting of our noisy politicians to join them in the tumult, seem to have withdrawn from meddling in politics and are concentrating on things of the spirit, and on inspiring our faithful to thoughts of eternal life. Our priests, with a few irascible exceptions, are returning to the worship of God. Our altars are no longer being transformed into bully pulpits pursuing a political agenda. This is something for which we can be thankful.

So many people seem to be scolding our soldiers on the occasion of 109th Anniversary of the Philippine Army which is commemorated today. They are being lectured to stay out of politics, which they should. But why the urgency with which such servants are being delivered? Even the press, which loves to preen itself as the Fourth Estate, in a category dating back to the French Revolution, seems jealous of the ever more important role being played by the military in our society. I think our own Star columnist, Federico D. Pascual Jr., put this unease on the part of the media well, when he said in his column yesterday that the military has replaced the press "as the fourth branch of government".

Dick Pascual was, of course, speaking tongue-in-cheek when he made that quip. The press is not a branch of government. But it's clear enough that more and more, La Presidenta is depending on the loyalty of our Armed Forces (and Police) to keep her constitutionally in power.

I'm not saying that foes like Dinky Soliman and her black T-shirt brigade can possibly oust GMA from office, for all the clamor they generate. On the other hand, there are more powerful and sinister forces at work and GMA evidently needs the military to deal with them. I have read criticisms, including in this newspaper, of the fact that La Gloria has been going to military camps to dialogue with the officers and men. Why shouldn't she go? She is, after all, concurrently the Commander-in-Chief—and it's healthy that she keeps in touch with what the rank and file and the young officers are thinking, and what their problems are. I suggest, however, that she talk with small groups without any of her generals present or eavesdropping, or she'll never get the younger officers or the noncommissioned to speak freely and candidly.