In his column in the *Inquirer* yesterday, our cousin Ramon J. Farolan, by the way a retired editor-in-chief of this newspaper, ambassador, and former Customs Commissioner (a retired Air Force General in his own right) mentioned one of our finest officers, the late Gen. Vicente Lim. As we commemorate Army Day, General Lim cannot be forgotten. He valiantly commanded the Forty-first Division in the Battle of Bataan. This all-Filipino Division fought so tenaciously under the leadership of Lim that the late Foreign Secretary Carlos P. Romulo was moved to send a letter to him on 18 February 1942, from Corregidor where Romulo was in a bunker with Gen. Douglas MacArthur, which said: "You are the one Filipino general who has caught the imagination of everyone . . . Keep on fighting with the same fearlessness and the same determination. Victory will be ours soon—and when I say this I know whereof I speak."

Defeat, not victory, the record shows came soon enough for the “battling bastards of Bataan,” but their surrender to the Japanese was not in shame. They fought with all their hearts before the heartbreak of being compelled to surrender having run out of food and out of bullets, and then underwent a terrible Death March that took its own toll of thousands of our boys during that unforgivable forced march to prison camp. The gallantry of our men was poignantly described by General Lim himself in a letter smuggled from the front lines (on February 20, 1942) to his wife Pilar in Japanese-occupied Manila. Lim said, "The estimated casualties that we gave the Japs in that battle (of Abucay) was 40,000 dead and wounded . . . I sincerely give the credit to my officers and enlisted men. They are the ones who did it all. Mine is only to inspire and to lead them. When history is written, I will give them all the credit. Their satisfaction is mine to share." Vicente Lim, indeed, inspired and led. After release from the Capas Concentration Camp he went back to fight the Japanese in the guerilla movement. According to Farolan, sometime in June 1944 he was captured by a Japanese naval unit and taken to Fort Santiago. From there he was transferred to the Bilibid Prison. Farolan recounts that it is believed that Lim was later executed by the Japanese. His body was never found.

In our family we're equally proud of our father, Benito T. Soliven. An assemblyman and a captain in the reserved forces, he volunteered to go to Bataan and fight, where he was promoted to major in the field. He was among the Death Marchers who reached the concentration camp
in Capas, Tarlac, named Camp O'Donnell, only half alive. He was a subgroup commander in that hell hole of a prisoner-of-war camp. When he was released by the Japanese seven months later after being transferred to Bilibid Prison, he was already dying of malaria. It was an honor to him to have been able to fight in the USAFFE and our Philippine Army. This is why all the statues of him, such as the one standing in Soliven Plaza in our hometown of Sto. Domingo, Ilocos Sur and the one in Plaza Burgos in the capital of Vigan, portray him in military uniform.

Our army has fought continuously since the Philippine Revolution to the ex-Philippine Expedition Force (PEFTOK) which we sent to fight in Korea. Among those who fought there, and later served in the Philcag in South Vietnam, was, of course, former Pres. Fidel V. Ramos. Our troops continue to fight NPA insurgency and Moro rebellion in Mindanao.

The army tradition goes back to the barefoot battalions we sent into combat against the Spaniards during the war for independence and against the Americans in the Philippine-American War, which the Americans like to call “The Insurrection”. In that latter conflict, Filipino guerillas slew more Americans in less than a four-year period than have been killed in Iraq and wounded many more. We have an accurate body count of this, since in those days the American dead could not be transported home to the United States for burial and had to be interred here. Naturally, we lost many more of our own brave men, owing to superior American weaponry and cannon. When can their glory fade? War is hell, but the glory lies in the fact that so many of our young men were willing to sacrifice their lives and their hopes for the future, for our motherland. This is why all of us must say a prayer and say, Mabuhay on Army Day.

One of the most eloquent testimonials to what happened after the “defeat” of our Army in Bataan was ironically provided by then Lt. Ferdinand E. Marcos, who later became the dictator Marcos. In his memoirs, he wrote:

When I remember the Death March, I don’t recollect so much the sufferings of the prisoners on their way, for they were soldiers meant for death and pain; but I remember an old woman who was at the window of a nipa hut, waving at the long stream of unkempt, bedraggled and emaciated hulks of men, scorched, flogged, and driven along the hot
summer road. She was peering into the faces passing by her as if she were looking for someone. I could see tears profusely falling from her eyes and I could tell why her pose seemed to say: 'As your fathers were before you, my sons, you too are marching in defeat.' It happened that the Japanese guard halted the column, just when I was in front of her. As the column stopped, this silver-haired, old grandmother started to throw us small packages wrapped in banana leaves. She was crying in a quivering voice, 'Take these, my sons; take them all and be strong again.' She must have been keeping them for a grandson whom she could not locate. And we were her grandson's comrades. We knew what would happen to her, for we had seen many of the civilians abused and bayonetted for attempting to give us succor. So we cried to her to stop throwing us food and to run from the yellow demon who was hastening towards her house. 'Run, Lola,' we cried in Tagalog. 'This is enough you have given us. Run for your life. The conqueror will come and kill you.' But she kept on throwing the parcels of food, smiling sorrowfully at us, crying, 'Take them all. You are young, I am an old woman.' The Japanese guard ran up the house and we could see his uniformed figure from behind. We saw him lunge at her, and we could feel the sharp bayonet through her breast as she crumpled and disappeared below the window sill.

We cursed ourselves then for having given up our arms and with them our manhood. There were some hardy souls who wished to kill the guards, but the older men prevailed upon them with the caution: 'Just remember this, just remember this: there will be a time when they will pay for all this!'

True enough the time of reckoning came. A brave army and a brave people—this is a legacy we must never forget.

March 20, 2006

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The unexpected achievement of the Czech Republic’s Ambassador, Jaroslav Ludva, of translating our national hero Jose Rizal’s *Mi Ultimo Adios* ("My Last Farewell") into the Czech language—then delivering all fourteen stanzas of the poem written by Rizal on the eve of his execution in 1896 in the original Spanish—is admirable and breathtaking. Why did a Czech diplomat undertake such a thing? Ambassador Ludva explains that he was always fascinated with Rizal, especially since Rizal’s best friend was a Czech: namely, Professor Ferdinand Blumentritt. It turns out that Blumentritt had been a school principal in the town of Litomerice, in what is now known as the Czech Republic. (Country names in Europe change dramatically, it must be noted; the Czech Republic was born when Slovakia broke away from the Czechs after World War II, for the country used to be known as Czechoslovakia).

The city of Litomerice has reportedly built four monuments to Rizal including a bust in its city hall. My wife and I were told when we were visiting Prague with our daughter Sara six years ago that in the museum was a gold pen which Rizal had gifted to his friend Blumentritt, the pen with which he had signed the first copy of his revolutionary novel, *El Filibusterismo*. This piece of information was relayed to us by Ambassador Menchu Salas. In fact Dr. Blumentritt was such a fanatical admirer of Rizal, that when he had learned Rizal’s longtime girlfriend, Leonor Rivera, had tired of waiting for Rizal and married an Englishman named Kipping, Blumentritt had written an angry letter to Leonor scolding her for marrying somebody else, instead of such a magnificent and heroic genius as Jose! But how can we blame Ms. Rivera? Rizal, consumed by his passion for liberty, had neglected Leonor for 11 years and had not even visited her on his last visit to the Philippines!

Anyway, Blumentritt, as everybody knows, is equally honored here by having had a very long street named after him in Manila. I remember Blumentritt very well, because after the war, with our home in Paco totally destroyed, we lived for a year in the home of my late maternal grandfather on Calle Cavite, and I had to cross Blumentritt Street almost everyday when walking to my third year high school classes in the Ateneo, which was then in Plaza Guipit, Sampaloc. I always thought that Blumentritt had been an Austrian, not a Czech. This was confirmed in a sense by Austrian Ambassador Herbert Jager
who said that while Blumentritt is regarded as a Czech citizen, in Rizal’s
time he was technically an Austrian citizen because the country was
part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire with its capital in Vienna.

Whether in Spanish or now in Czech, Jose Rizal’s deathless Last
Farewell is immortal. It is always a thrill to me to see the Jose Rizal
statue in Madrid, Spain. It stands at the crossroads of a beautiful park
and beside it is inscribed in stone his Mi Ultimo Adios in both Spanish
and Filipino (Tagalog). Passersby always stop by the statue and read
the poem, then nod their heads in admiration. Truly, our hero is our
nation’s pride.

An interesting thing happened to me when I was a student in the
University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, in 1952. All Fulbright-Smith-
Mundt scholars from all over the world were required in those days
to take a course in English language studies at that University. When
the time came to elect a president of that organization, the leading
candidate was a student from India, whose election seemed completely
assured since all the Commonwealth countries which had been British
Colonies, as well as Canada and Great Britain were unanimously
supporting her. In order to make it a two-person fight, my roommate,
a young German student named Karl Van Ditzhuysen and Herbert
Rauter, who hailed from Dusseldorf, nominated me to my surprise.

How could I win? But when I was on stage, the inspiration struck me.
I asked myself—why don’t I explain who I am as a Filipino? I started
out by saying how our family had suffered during World War II and
the Japanese Occupation, losing many members including my father,
grandfather, and uncle to Japanese cruelty. We had fought the Japanese
in our family including myself and my mother who had joined the
guerilla movement. But now the war was over, I said, and we should all
now become friends and brothers although we still felt the pain of the
wounds of the past. Then I said that we in the Philippines, aside from
having been tutored by the Americans had a proud Spanish heritage.
I told the audience that nobody fought for Philippine freedom more
ferociously than Jose Rizal our hero, but his finest works including his
two revolutionary novels have been written in Spanish.

Then, I recited the Mi Ultimo Adios from beginning to end. At
the conclusion of my recital, the Spanish students and all the South
American students leaped to their feet and shouted: “Arriba!” and “Viva
Rizal!” When the votes came in all the South Americans, Carribbeans,
and the Spaniards, of course, had voted for me. So did the Japanese and the Germans. I could quip later that I had been voted to victory by the Axis vote! Thanks to Jose Rizal and his magnificent poem.

March 23, 2006

What's this? In Muslim-dominated Afghanistan, an Islamic court is reportedly on the verge of condemning 41-year-old Abdul Rahman to death for having converted to Christianity! The prosecutor in this case involving Shariah law has called Rahman “a microbe” who “should be killed.” Sanamagan! What sort of justice is this—and what kind of unforgivable crime did poor Abdul Rahman commit? It turns out that he had converted to Christianity about 15 years ago while working with a Christian aid group helping Afghan refugees. His “apostasy” came to light recently when he sought custody of his children from his parents. His angry parents and relatives, “devout” Muslims who had strongly opposed Rahman's conversion, complained to the authorities that Rahman had abandoned Islam and embraced the Christian faith. For this, would you believe, Rahman was arrested—and now faces execution.

Is this the year 2006? Or are these the Dark Ages? When United States and Allied Forces invaded Afghanistan four years ago to overthrow the yoke of the fundamentalist Taliban, we thought that democracy and liberty would flower in Afghanistan. Aid poured into Afghanistan from all over the world. The Afghans, to the applause of onlookers, adopted a new Constitution in 2004 upholding Islamic law and guaranteeing freedom of religious belief. It turns out that the two concepts are not compatible with each other. As the furious Afghan prosecutors argued in court, conversion is illegal under Islamic law! Aba, in our predominantly Catholic country don't we permit Shariah courts? We must restudy this. In our country, our Muslims keep on insisting that Islam stands for peace and tolerance. They call Christians their brothers and sisters, and insist on their right to build mosques and centers of Islamic worship everywhere. Yet, in Saudi Arabia where admittedly more than 900,000 of our OFWs are gainfully employed, no Filipinos or other foreigners are permitted to bring in Christian
Bibles, crucifixes, rosaries, stampitas, or any objects or symbols of the Christian faith. There are no Christian churches or chapels allowed, neither is the celebration of the Holy Mass permitted. Even during the Gulf War, American, British and other foreign servicemen were not given permission to hold Christmas services in any of their camps on Saudi soil, but had to resort to holding Christian services on ships at sea or elsewhere in the region. It's understandable that Saudi Arabia is strictly devout, being the guardian of the two holiest shrines of Islam, namely: Makkah (Mecca), and Medina. But must it be to the complete exclusion of other religions? This is impossible for most of us to understand. And yet, because much of the world—including the Philippines—are very dependent on Saudi oil, we all reluctantly tiptoe around the issue and timidly evade any clash on it.

Ironically, Saudi Arabia is the foremost financier and promoter of the building of Muslim mosques all over the planet, from Istanbul to Manila. The Saudis, some years ago, even tried to build a mosque inside the campus of the Philippine Military Academy, but were finally told that they could build their mosque elsewhere in Baguio. Today, aside from the huge Golden Mosque in Quiapo and in the Islamic center in Taguig, there's a big mosque in Baclaran right across from our Catholic center of pilgrimage, the Baclaran church and Shrine to Our Mother of Perpetual Help. In the bailiwick of Speaker Joe de Venecia, Dagupan City, there's also a large mosque. So, speaking of tolerance, we practice it here in our Christian Philippines, although, some hardline Moros sometimes call this writer a card-carrying member of Bigots Inc.

This brings us back to the outrageous case of the unfortunate Abdul Rahman. A judge dealing with his case told the Reuters news agency, as reported in The New York Times, that Afghanistan's judiciary would not bend to outside pressure. "Afghanistan is an Islamic country and its judiciary will act independently" declared Supreme Court Judge Ansarullah Mawlavizada. "No other policy will be accepted apart from Islamic orders and what our Constitution says."

U. S. President George W. Bush asserted on a visit last Wednesday to Wheeling, West Virginia to rally support for the war on Iraq: "I'm troubled when I hear—deeply troubled when I hear that a person who has converted away from Islam may be held to account. That's not the universal application of the values that I talked about." And there's the rub. Afghanistan and Iraq are similar riddles. The values Mr. Bush talks
so endlessly about are not easily transplanted or applied. They do not readily flourish on inhospitable ground. Afghanistan, sorry to say, is beginning to look like another Iraq. If you ask me, Mr. Bush went into Iraq to topple the tyrant Saddam Hussein, and help bring “democracy” to the Iraqis (as well as seize weapons of mass destruction which were never found), with the best of intentions. But you know how the old saying goes: “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” The hundred of thousands of American troops and their slowly dwindling coalition partners find themselves, indeed, in hell in Iraq. Worst of all, despite U. S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s protestations, the Iraqis are surely on the verge of a bitter Civil War. The Americans like to use the euphemism “sectarian strife,” but what’s happening is that the Sunni and the Shia Muslims have began to slaughter each other and blow up each other’s mosques. Before they get trapped in between, President Bush (battered by sharply falling approval ratings and looking increasingly perplexed) should cut his losses and run.

True, Dubya and his fellow Americans are haunted by the American failure in Vietnam and Mr. Bush doesn’t want to be equated in history with Lyndon B. Johnson. Yet, even more pathetically than the quagmire in South Vietnam in the 1970s, the American and Coalition Forces now find themselves bloodily stumbling along in the desert confused by a terrible sandstorm even more blinding than the fog of war. I am among those who still credit Mr. Bush for idealism (rather than a greed for oil) as his motive for the faltering effort to implant “democracy” in the hostile sands. However, even a first-year student of history, I submit, should know that democracy is not a tree which can be stuck in the ground, watered, and made to grow. It took almost two centuries to get democracy right in America, including a terrible Civil War, which resulted in more than a million Americans dead on the battlefield alone, the destruction of many American cities and towns, and the tragedy of the assassination of one of America’s most-beloved presidents, Abe Lincoln. Democracy in the U. S., as Al Gore continues to argue, but gallantly only in whispers, was even in doubt in the state of Florida, where President Bush in his first run for the White House narrowly, and some insist suspiciously, squeaked through to his first-term victory. In Iraq, how long will it take—and at what cost? My suggestion, although it may be humiliating and won’t be easy, is that Mr. Bush get his boys and girls out of that sandtrap and let the Iraqi people find their own way.
Coming back to the Rahman case, other officials from Germany, Italy, and Canada, which have troops serving in Afghanistan, have similarly expressed their concerns to Afghan President Hamid Karzai. In truth, how can these governments, which are helping Afghanistan not only militarily but with buckets of aid in the form of money, food, and other forms of sustenance, believe that they have been helping bring democracy and freedom to the Afghan people, when a man can still be put to death by a religious court for converting from Islam to Christianity? If one converted from Christianity to Islam, would he suffer the same faith as Rahman?

The Germans play host in their country to millions of Muslim Turks (who originally migrated to Germany as Gastarbeiter or “guest workers,” with many of them now German citizens). They are apparently the most indignant of all since Rahman once lived in Germany. The Germans still maintain more than 2,000 troops in Afghanistan to shore up the Karzai government and promote the democratic values they see now being trampled in Rahman’s sad case. Therefore, they believe they have a strong stake in this tragedy. What is admirable is that Rahman is courageously standing fast. Holding a Bible in his hand, Rahman told the Kabul court: “I’m not an apostate, I’m obedient to God but I’m a Christian, that’s my choice.” Tertullian once wrote that “The blood of martyrs is the seed of Christianity.” In this period of Lent, we hope that the brave Abdul Rahman will not, in the end, be compelled to embrace martyrdom for his faith. But we hail and honor him for his choice.

March 26, 2006

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There’s always something stirring, not just colorful, about a graduation parade of the Philippine Military Academy. It’s right that the PMA graduation rites were brought to the television sets of the nation by “live” camera. Televiewers, along with those on the grandstand, could thus marvel at the precision and snap of the long gray line, and say to themselves: “These are the young men and women who will be defending our nation.”

The most eloquent speech delivered at last Saturday’s ceremonies in Fort Del Pilar, Loakan, Baguio City was not that of the President’s
but the earnest remarks uttered by the topnotcher of the 324-member Mandala graduating class, Cadet Ariel M. Toledo of Sto. Domingo, Ilocos Sur. Speaking in English heavily accented by his Ilocano tongue, Toledo called on his classmates to “seize the day” (a take off from the famous Latin exhortation, “carpe diem!”) and exhibit “daily heroism” as they go forth to serve their country. His short address was, though corny, so moving and elicited the loudest applause of the day. An orphan whose father and brother were killed in 1992 under circumstances the family is reluctant to explain, Ariel then thanked his five OFW sisters for helping put him through school and inspiring him in most everything else. This family solidarity was emphasized when one of his sisters flew in all the way from Chicago where she works as a warehouse clerk to attend her brother’s graduation even though it had entailed a bit of hardship and much expense. As the sister, Immaculada Concepcion Toledo-Rabanal, explained it in a newspaper interview, she and her four sisters went to work abroad in order to earn enough to send their younger siblings like Ariel to school. This OFW story is magnified 8 million times. Truly, our 8 million overseas workers exhibit the daily heroism, of which brand new Second Lt. Toledo spoke.

Radio, television, and the newspapers made much about the fact that the graduating cadets and the PMA cadet corps paraded against the backdrop of a huge arch at the top of which was emblazoned “LOYALTY,” as if to imply that PMA Superintendent Brig. Gen. Leopoldo Maligalig was underscoring “loyalty” to GMA and the Constitution. But in some newspapers, the photographs were incomplete. The backdrop really constituted three arches, on the first two of which were bannered the rest of the motto of the 108-year-old Military Academy, “COURAGE” and “INTEGRITY.” In short, just as our cadets had copied their smart gray wool uniforms (with shako headgear) from the United States Military Academy at West Point, they had coined a similar slogan for their corps. The PMA’s motto, “Courage, Integrity, Loyalty,” was conceived as a match for West Point’s “Duty, Honor, Country.” Alas, as in every institution, not all PMA graduates, “Mistah,” or Cavalier, has always lived up to their school’s motto. Yet, those three words represent noble ideals every PMA officer must continue to strive to vindicate. Mabuhay to the PMA! May the Mandala Class of 2006 firmly stand at the vanguard of our defense!

At this juncture, we must not forget that the real backbones of our officer corps in the Armed Forces are those who were not privileged
to go for elite training in the PMA. Seventy percent of the officers commanding our fighting men in the field come from the ROTC and reserve training schools in colleges and universities throughout our country. These officers, who have served just as gallantly in combat are mostly unnoticed and unsung, perhaps because they don’t get involved in coup plots and conspiracies unlike their more “elite” comrades from the Military Academy. Oh well. As the American saying goes, “It’s the squeaking wheel that gets the grease.”

Don’t you think it’s absurd that the Palace and our military brass keep on announcing assassination plots against _La Presidenta_? Of course, there’s always an assassination plot or two—in troubled times, this practically goes with the “job description” of whoever’s president or prime minister of a society in ferment. It’s not good form to publicize murder schemes, even if they exist. The best way is to keep quiet and nab the conspirators. Our generals, for instance, must not believe that by ranting about an assassination conspiracy, they will scare off would-be assassins. A determined suicide-bomber or well-concealed sniper could have “offed” GMA at the PMA grandstand, but thankfully nothing happened. So, talking about a plot so loudly, only made it appear that our government officials and military intelligence people are a panicky sort.

Let’s cut out the dramatics in future cases. Like every other Chief Executive, GMA and her men ought merely to take the proper precautions without being made to appear by their own propagandists like scared chickens. By gosh, more violent demonstrations have taken place in Paris and other French cities, with more are being planned by increasingly unruly students and labor unions. What puzzles me is why the demonstrators love to overturn cars and other vehicles and set them afire, turning the streets of the French capital into copycat images of bomb-wrecked and devastated Baghdad. Is this a fight for justice they are waging? Or is it just plain, over violent outbreak of tomfoolery, mischief, and idiotic destructiveness? What offense did the unfortunate car owners and bus companies commit against the student and labor rioters? Mind you, to a working-class or middle-class family, a car is expensive. To lose a private vehicle to mindless mob action is a personal tragedy.

The current orgy of stupid and sadistic waste surely tarnishes the protest movement and makes it appear to all the world like a disgusting explosion of sheer vandalism. As one who knows Paris
somewhat well, I can tell you that at all times of day and night the streets and boulevards of that dynamic city are constantly lined with parked cars, and other vehicles, or otherwise mired in traffic. I hope that the vehicle owners got their prized possessions out of the way, and hopefully out of town, before the rampaging mobs started turning the city into a pyre of torched cars and scorched buildings. Any sympathy I can say for myself, which might have been entertained earlier for the rambunctious students and fist-shaking workers, has since evaporated. Paris now has evidently lost its tourists, which come to millions of visitors every month, as well as its reputation for reasonable discourse and love of gaiety. What's happened to the *Lido*, *Moulin Rouge*, and *Le Crazy Horse* saloon? Have the lights gone out in the Champs Elysees? Certainly, there no longer seems to be any concord in the Place de la Concorde. Alas, the mobs are storming the Bastille again, and again.

A senior editor at *The Weekly Standard*, Christopher Caldwell, in a piece entitled "Hypocrisy takes to the streets," put it very well yesterday when he wrote that it isn't clear whether France is "suffering a big bout of juvenile delinquency or standing on the brink of a revolution." Actually, the French youth are violently protesting a matter of ho-hum importance. They feel threatened by a new labor law, a sort of "first-job contract," by which employers will be permitted to fire employees who are under the age of 26 if they fail to measure up. This was a labor reform measure cautiously proposed by Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin to encourage employers to give jobs to unemployed French youths since in their age bracket 20 percent cannot find jobs. Instead of hailing this as a law to help them gain employment, students angrily rebelled at the very idea. It's a wonder that France remains a comparatively wealthy country in a Europe plagued by massive unemployment, when French employers literally cannot fire anybody and men and women in the workforce, smugly secure in their guaranteed jobs, would like to work fewer hours for more pay and more vacation time. Someday, it is axiomatic there will come a time of reckoning.

For poor de Villepin, who honestly tried to remedy the situation, his initiative has woefully backfired. It's now somewhat iffy whether he will even be able to run for president next year in 2007, despite the sponsorship of his backer, the incumbent President Jacques Chirac. He is now trying desperately to back-pedal by holding dialogues with students and workers. Sadly, I see and an abject surrender in the near-
future. This will only send a message to the young people that anarchy and violence get results. Not good citizenship training, if you ask me. Yet, who are we in the Philippines to throw stones? We have our own homegrown anarchists, nihilists, and troublemakers. The good news is that our people, young and old, seem too tired of meaningless protests and demonstrations and have shown that they prefer to steadily stay in school or go to work.

March 27, 2006

If you’ll recall, it was The New York Times that built up the Cuban revolucionario Fidel Castro Ruz. Herbert Matthews, one of the Time’s senior correspondents, went into the mountains of the Sierra Maestra and returned with stirring photographs of Fidel, Che Guevara, and his Barbudos, and declaring that Fidel was the hope of bringing freedom and democracy to Cuba, by toppling the dictatorial rule of the military despot, Fulgencio Batista. Matthews and the Times asserted that Castro was not a Communist, but a nationalist—indeed, Fidel resolutely vowed he was not even a Socialist. The legend of Fidel and his resolute band was woven by The New York Times, and indeed he cut a fine figure. After he and his “26 of July” movement allied with center-right and rightwing students and guerrilla movements overthrew Batista, sending him and his cohorts fleeing the country on New Year’s Eve 1959–1960, Fidel was welcomed in New York city with kisses and confetti, like a conquering hero.

This writer flew to La Habana in 1961 to spend a few months there writing a series of eleven front page articles on “What Went Wrong in the Bahia de Cochinos” (Or Why the Invasion in the Bay of Pigs Had Failed). By that time, Fidel had shown his true colors and was declaring his government Socialist—later, Communist. I remember standing in the blazing sun in the Plaza Civica, with an immense crowd of fervent supporters, while Fidel spoke for three hours, assailing the corrupt, imperialist United States and the other enemies of “democracy” and Socialism. With him on the stage were, of course, the handsome Che (already becoming an international icon), and the Soviet Union’s famed Cosmonaut, the first man into space, Yuri Gagarin. (I told my
Cuban friends that Gagarin was an Ilocano—for it's true there are many Gagarins in Ilocos Norte, not just Marcoses, Vers, and Abians).

Fidel was a spellbinder on the entablado in that heady era, even though his regime was already stained with the blood of even former comrades and fellow, but middle-class rebel fighters against Batista. He thundered that “if the Norteamericanos don’t want to live 90 miles from a Socialist country” (the first in the Americas) “they should move!” Despite the smothering heat, the audience frequently erupted into locomotive yells of “Fidel, Fidel, Fidel, Fidel!!!!!” Or songs like “Somos Socialistas, palante, palante!” Or “Fidel, que tiene Fidel, que los Norteamericanos no pueden con el!” The slogans of the hour were, naturally, “sin cuota, pero sin amo.” (No sugar quota, but no master!) and “Patria o muerte, venceremos!” (Fatherland or Death—we shall overcome!)

Afterwards, Fidel enthusiastically told me when I said I had studied at the Ateneo de Manila, “Hermano,” he exclaimed, “soy Jesuita tambien!” No wonder he’s like that. It turned out that from boyhood he had been trained by the Spanish Jesuits, first in his native Santiago de Cuba and later in the capital of Havana. In their first school, he and his brother had been expelled by the Jesuit fathers because they were too rowdy. This was the Colegio Dolores. The boy Fidel raged at his parents, but his mother said the priests didn’t want him back because he and his brother Raul were troublemakers. He then threatened her: “Mama, if you don’t send me back to that school, I will burn down this house!” Afterwards, they sent him to enrol in the more exclusive Jesuit school in Havana, the Colegio de Belen. There, Fidel’s upper middle class and upper class schoolmates scoffed at him as Guajiro (probinsyano) which, afterwards, despite his terrible temper and violent nature became a term of endearment.

As for Che Guevara (an Argentine, really, from Rosario), it was hard to imagine him Governor of the Central Bank—but he was concurrently the official berdugo. The joke, told himself by Che, was that when Fidel was farming out Cabinet and other major posts to his cronies and comrades, he had called out: “Who among you is an Economist?” Che, a doctor actually, raised his hand. Afterwards, he explained when he was surprisingly designated head of the Central Bank and other financial institutions, “Economist? I thought you had said ‘Communist!’” Che later died in Bolivia, tracked down and shot
down in the forest by CIA-trained Special Forces. Anyway, the New York Times had guessed wrong about the young Fidel Castro.

Now, in Latin America another Fidelista has arisen, El Commandante Hugo Chavez Frias of Venezuela. Chavez is using his country’s oil wealth to give out “aid” to other countries like Mexico, and other South American nations (perhaps he’s already doled out US $25 billion) in order to mobilize them against the United States of America. I had interviewed him some years ago, and he said that Fidel Castro was his idol and role model. He’s now surpassing his idol, even in colorful gimmickry. On a recent TV program, I saw him explaining how he and his archers would repel a “coming American invasion” with poison-tipped arrows!

One of the most unforgettable photographs in US newspaper history is that of President Truman stepping out onto the rear platform of his “whistle-stop” campaign train, the Ferdinand Magellan (by coincidence), on 4 November 1948 in St. Louis, Missouri. Truman was chatting with reporters when somebody handed him a copy of the Chicago Tribune, his least favorite newspaper. Across the front of it ran a huge headline, soon to become immortal: “DEWEY DEFEATS TRUMAN.” Holding the newspaper aloft in both hands, grinning from ear to ear, Truman paused to allow photographers to snap that scene, his cheshire-cat smile as if to say: “Don’t believe everything you read in the newspapers.” For by that time, Truman had already crushed his Republican rival, Thomas E. Dewey. Truman, whom almost all the newspapers (including The New York Times, Washington Post, and Wall Street Journal) had predicted would be buried under a Dewey landslide had carried 28 states with a total of 303 electoral votes, and even licked Dewey in the popular vote by more than 2.1 million. Truman polled, in the final tally, 24,105,812 votes, Dewey 21,970,065.

In that crucial election, the first postwar contest, Newsweek magazine took a poll of fifty highly regarded political writers to ask who would win the election. The results appeared in the 11 October 1948 issue, or three weeks before election day. Of the pundits polled, not one thought Truman would win. The vote was unanimous, 50 for Dewey, 0 for Truman. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Truman, David McCullough quoted Newsweek as declaring: “The landslide for Dewey will sweep the country.” The election was as good as over. The gamblers’ odds, the opinion polls, the forecasts by columnists, political reporters, political experts, biographer McCullough noted, had
practically dismissed Truman. The biggest and most influential dailies, such as the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, The Washington Star, the Kansas City Star, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, the Wall Street Journal, all endorsed Dewey.

The Detroit Free Press called Truman intellectually unqualified. The Chicago Tribune simply dubbed Truman "an incompetent." The Boston Post, it seems, was the rare exception. In its editorial, the Post called Truman "Captain Courageous" and described him as "humbly honest, homespun and doggedly determined to do what is best for America as Abraham Lincoln." In the words of the old song, the newspaper hymned Harry, because he "Dared to be a Daniel; Dared to stand alone. Dared to hold a purpose firm. Dared to make it known." On the final day, The New York Times predicted a Dewey victory with 345 electoral votes. The Wall Street Journal and Newsweek prognosticated Dewey would have a clean sweep. LIFE magazine carried a full-page photo of Dewey, slugged "The Next President."

When Truman, on Friday, 5 November returned to Washington in triumph, almost everybody in town lined the streets to hail him. Passing the stone-fronted offices of the Washington Post, Truman looked up to see a big sign strung across the facade: "WELCOME HOME FROM CROW-EATERS!" By golly, Harry—you showed 'em! The historian Eric Sevareid would say nearly forty years later of Truman: "I am not sure he was right about the atomic bomb, or even Korea. But remembering him reminds people what a man in that office (of the President) ought to be like. It's character, just character. He stands like a rock in memory now." Character is what makes the difference. Harry fought on, never-say-die, whatever his most vicious critics and the doomsayers said. Victory over vitriol is never attained by words, but by difficult, courageous deeds. That's Harry's legacy to us all. Hats off to you, Give 'em Hell Harry! You gave Americans a kick in the bottom, and a shining example to all of us never to be forgotten.

April 7, 2006

There's so much political stuff on my table that I'm tempted to write about politics, the lies they tell about traffic, intrigue, the normal malicious gossip, and the usual day-to-day type of "expose" columnists
revel in during the regular week. But, by gum, it's already Holy Week—it's time to take a break, at least for the nonce, from the unholy. Since the Gospels and the homilies of yesterday have turned to Jerusalem, perhaps it's pertinent to return to a description of that old Jebusite city, the "Holy City," written by one of the finest travel writers of the past generation, the Englishman H.V. Morton, whose books, particularly *In the Steps of the Master* (Methuen and Co. Ltd. London, originally 1934, reprinted 1971), remain classics.

Remarked Morton of his first sight of Jerusalem in 1934:

... Never had I seen a more intolerant looking city. All the hardness of the rock and the smouldering fires within the rock seemed to have boiled up out of the bowels of the earth and cooled into the city of Jerusalem. It was a perfect expression, so it seemed to me, of the cruelty and fierceness of the Judaean highlands. This high city, perched above ravines and lying among the debris of centuries, might, it seemed, be the abode not of men and women and children, but the dwelling-place of ruthless emotions such as Pride and Arrogance and Hate. And as I sat for a long while looking down on Jerusalem, I thought to myself: 'That is undoubtedly the place that crucified Jesus Christ.' Like an echo to my thought came a terrible reply: 'And it would probably do so again.'

... Jerusalem had not been born out of volcanic lava, she had at least been born out of the fire of men's minds. Splendid and terrible things have happened behind her walls. The modern world was born in their shadow. Strange that the greatest event in the history of Mankind should have occurred on this bare plateau; stranger still, perhaps, that Jerusalem should still wear her historic air of intolerance. I seemed to hear a Voice in the pulse of the heat and the Voice said:

'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!' The words beat against my brain like an echo of the heat that quivered above the Mount of Olives. I listened again, but there was no sound but the thrusting of a plough through the dry soil and the click of a mule's hoof against a flint.
When you consider that H.V. Morton had penned those lines in 1934, how pertinent his harsh paragraphs remain, so pungently descriptive of the Jerusalem fought over between Israelis and Palestinians today! A city of intolerance and fratricide indeed! The quotation, above, too is timely. It was the lament of Jesus Christ when He wept over Jerusalem.

Morton's gift is that he paints images so colorfully and insightfully that they endure the test of half a century without being faded or eroded by the passage of time, or scarred by the bullets, rockets, and bombs of intermittent wars, or the comings and goings of conquerors and the vanquished. The next passage in his 1934 travelogue (page 19) relates:

Climbing to the top of the hill I mounted to a dome near the Chapel of the Ascension, which now belongs to the Moslems. On the paved space around the dome an elderly little guide, wearing sun spectacles, a European suit and a scarlet tarbush [fez might be more familiar—MVS], was explaining Jerusalem to a crowd of English tourists, pointing here and there with an unrolled umbrella. I noticed that he talked to them about Jesus Christ as if he were a missionary explaining the rudimentary facts of Christianity to a crowd of rather feeble-minded Patagonians.

'You remember, please,' he said, 'that our Lord ascended into heaven.'

'Well, please,' continued the little guide, pointing with his umbrella, 'the site of the Ascension is just there by the little round building, which we can enter in a moment. You will remember, please, that it was here that our Lord said goodbye to His disciples.'

The group nodded. The little guide's high voice ploughed on through his deliberate recital:

And He said, 'Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.'

There was silence for a few seconds. I like to think that all those people, who were touring Jerusalem as they would tour Cairo or Athens, felt, as I did, that a ridiculous situation
had been lifted by those lovely, shining words into another world. 'And lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.' Even the little guide's high voice with its odd accent could not hurt these words. It seemed to me that something supremely beautiful had shone for a moment on all of us, and had gone. Then a colonel (in the audience) cleared his throat and asked his wife if she had remembered his sun glasses.

When they had gone and I was alone on the roof, I turned my back on Jerusalem and, looking to the east, saw something I shall never forget.

The Mount of Olives is slightly higher than Jerusalem, and stands up therefore like a screen between the city and the desert land that falls to the Dead Sea.

Jerusalem is 2,500 feet above sea level; the Dead Sea is 1,290 feet below sea level. So that in the course of about twenty-five miles the land falls nearly 4,000 feet into the hot, tropical world of the Jordan Valley . . . From the top of the Mount of Olives the view into this tropical trench looked like a photograph of the mountains of the moon. I gazed down into an apparently sterile world, a world of brown, domed hills piled together, bare of vegetation, and falling rapidly into the hot distance where a streak of blue marked the waters of the Dead Sea. Beyond the blueness rose of barrier of brown hills streaked with violet shadows. They were the Mountains of Moab . . .

This was a view that Jesus knew well, and it has not altered since His eyes gazed upon it. He saw it when He came over the hill from Bethany, or Bethphage, and, no doubt, He turned, as every traveler turns, to look once more upon its superb indifference before, breastng the ridge, the view was hidden, and Jerusalem came into sight.

How could Jerusalem fail to be the Holy City with this terrifying breeding-place of prophets before its eyes? The Golden Age of Israel was in the desert, when God took His people by the hand and led them safely into the Promised Land.

. . . And the color of old Jerusalem is the color of a lion-skin. There are tawny yellows and dark browns and pale
golds. It must have looked very like this when Jesus saw it in the time of Herod Antipas: a city like a lion crouched in the sun, watchful, vindictive, and ready to kill.

How many times has this journalist come, too, to Jerusalem, by road or by helicopter experiencing the same eerie feeling: The City that kills the prophets, a lion crouching, a city on whose domes and tawny passageways Jesus Himself gazed, knowing what a cruel Destiny awaited him—the culmination of His redemptive mission on earth!

How often have we walked the Via Dolorosa, itself, leading to Golgotha and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Once, Teddy Kollek, the former Mayor of Jerusalem (before Ehud Olmert, who's now Prime Minister of Israel) took us on a walking tour of the Via Dolorosa. Olmert as Mayor was a quiet, hardworking official, not prone to jokes or brimming over with chutzpah, unlike Kollek—but an effective city executive nonetheless. He hosted dinner for us during our I.P.I. Congress in 1997 and we were impressed with his laid-back, almost lazy, charm.

In contrast, Kollek (who had presided over the “unification” of Jerusalem after the Six-Day War in 1967), was frank and hard bitten in language. He had served for years on the staff of one of Israel’s founders, the great David Ben-Gurion—and on the Old Testament “prophet’s” 80th birthday had awarded him the distinction of honorary citizen of Jerusalem. Kollek walked our group from the Jaffa Gate, a former No Man’s Land (walled off during the 19 years of the city’s division) and formerly known in Arabic as the Bab al Khalil (The Gate of the Friend, referring to “Father” Abraham—who sired both the Jews and the Arabs—and who is buried in Hebron (Khalil). The Crusaders, for their part, called it Porta David (David’s Gate) and it is marked so on Crusader maps.

The Via Dolorosa (our “Way of the Cross”) is for us Christians a memorial to the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ. I don’t know how many or how few will risk making the Via Crucis there this year. But on Good Friday, as they have done since the 14th Century, the Franciscans lead a procession of pilgrims carrying a large wooden cross, over paving stones dating back to the time of Jesus (but had been raised by Mayor Kollek in 1965 to the present street level).
Of the fourteen Stations, Kollek showed us, most are in the bustling market-place, “almost indistinguishable from the wholly secular streets and alleys of the Old City.” Station I is where Jesus was brought before Pontius Pilate in the courtyard of what is now the Omariyah Boys’ School. (There’s still debate over whether this is where the Praetorium, where Jesus was tried before the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate, really stood). Station II is where Jesus took up His cross, and here stands the Convent of the Flagellation and the Convent of the Sisters of Zion. A prominent arch overhead is known as the Ecce Homo Arch (where Pilate, according to tradition, presented Jesus to the mob, declaring, Ecce Homo (Behold the Man).

Station III marks the spot where Jesus fell for the first time. The chapel there once belonged to the Polish Catholic Church but was purchased in the 19th century by the Armenian Catholic Church. Station IV is where Mother Mary stood as Jesus passed by – it’s next to the Armenian Church, “Our Lady of the Spasm.” A right turn takes you to Station V, where Roman centurions ordered Simon of Cyrene to “help” Jesus carry the cross, seeing it weighed Him down even more exhaustingly.

Station VI is where St. Veronica wipes Jesus’s face, with the imprint of His blessed features stamped on the cloth. Here you’ll find the Church of the Holy Face and Saint Veronica of the Greek Catholic Patriarchate. Station VII has a Franciscan Chapel at the top of the street, marking the place where Jesus fell for the second time. On Khan es-Zeit street is Station VIII where Jesus warned the women of Jerusalem, as they wept for Him, of coming days of woe. The Station, Mayor Kollek pointed out, is marked by a Latin cross and the engraving in Greek, NIKA, which signifies “Christ is Victorious.” And so it goes. The final Five Stations of the Cross are inside the Holy Sepulchre compound itself.

The name Golgotha, all the textbooks will tell you, the site of the Crucifixion, comes from the Aramaic word for “skull,” indicating the skull-shape of the hill. (Aramaic is what Jesus spoke, more than He did Ivrit, or Hebrew). What bothered Kollek when he was administering the city was the fact that the different Christian churches were “fighting” with each other on who should run the Holy Sepulchre. There are the Latin Church (Roman Catholic), the Armenian Catholics, the Egyptian (Coptic) Catholics, the Greek Orthodox. Every square foot is portioned out, every pillar, every little altar. “It was true Solomonic
wisdom," Kollek sighed, "which allotted the keys to the main door to the care of Moslems. The Nusseibeh family for generations has faithfully fulfilled the task of guarding them impartially, and, each day, opening and closing the church doors!" Perhaps this is something Our Lord, the Messiah, should have settled before ascending into Heaven—and it's not likely to be taken up, either, on Judgment Day. But this is the human condition. Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

The most remarkable Israeli I ever met was a man named Itzhak Austrian. Yep, that was his surname. "I'm called Austrian," he quipped when we first met, "because I was born in Poland and fought in the Polish Army—it doesn't make sense, but in this crazy world, what does?" Bald, plump, caustically witty, unforgettable, Itzhak was an information officer of the Israeli government. He had, indeed, once been to Austria, his namesake country—as a "guest" of Adolf Hitler's S.S. who had dragged him off to one concentration camp there, his wife to another. Miraculously, he survived the pogrom, the Nazi prison camps, the misery of the new diaspora of postwar D.P.S. (displaced persons) and smuggled himself into Palestine. Even more miraculously, his wife, too, survived and found her way there. Together, they joined the Haganah, the Jewish underground and fought both British and Arabs to carve out a new State of Israel.

"Our ancestors in exile for almost two thousand years used to pray daily, hopefully, "Next year in Jerusalem," Itzhak would say, "And, now we have Jerusalem!" He grinned wryly: "And, boy, do we have problems—lack of water, bad plumbing, narrow streets. We asked for it, we got it. Shalom!" Yet, he was fiercely proud of their achievement. While having lunch one day at an inn on the outskirts of Tiberias, beside the Sea of Galilee, we heard singing in Russian. Around the corner we found some teenagers doing Cossack dances on a nearby lawn. "Sure, why not?" Itzhak laughed. "We're from everywhere. Our fighter pilots whose families came from the Shtel used to monitor those Russian MIG pilots the Egyptians were using and second-guess them, because they understood every word."

One day he drove us up to the top of Mount Tabor. There was a quaint church at the summit where the monks obligingly opened a floor panel near the altar which concealed the rocky base on which (they said) could be seen the imprint of Jesus' foot. "Recognize this
mountain? Itzhak boomed. “This is the Mount of Revelation—but the only revelation I have for you right now is that in a moment they’re going to serve us a few cups of home-made wine, and you’d just better pretend to drink it because it tastes simply awful.” He must have gone through this drill a zillion times, because the good monks, as predicted, offered us delicious-looking red wine, and it tasted, as advertised, terrible. We were a long way, I supposed, from the miracle of Cana.

I learned from Israeli friends what had happened to my friend Itzhak. He had died of a stroke just after the Six-Day War. He had been stricken fatally in the middle of telling a joke. What a wonderful way to go! He would have loved it that, for once, the joke was on him. I still have a scrap of paper on which Itzhak had written: “Dear God—Max Soliven is a good man.” He had offered to write it in Hebrew (Ivrit) because, as he insisted, God only reads Hebrew. “This piece of paper will get you past the Pearly Gates,” he had promised me. “After all, St. Peter, the Gatekeeper is a Jew.” Well, I say it now, although it may not get him any favors wherever he is: “Dear God—Itzhak Austrian is a good man.” I say it in Ilocano, which is the language God speaks.

April 10, 2006

In June 1983, this writer drove down from Hanover (the proud old Hanseatic city) to a small town named Celle, some 41 kilometers away. In those days, Celle had only 75,000 inhabitants who lived in simplicity in the 16th and 17th century half-timbered houses (exactly like those Saxon houses and picturesque taverns and pubs you find across the Channel in the English countryside). To get to Celle, my driver and I had to leave the Hamburg-Hanover Autobahn and resort to a narrow but well-asphalted country road.

Who knows where Celle is? For one thing, God knows. Why is this? Because in those days, the little town of Celle had what the Germans call a Turm Blaser. Everyday (in 1983, mind you), Sunday to Saturday, a 76-year-old layman named Walter Milter climbed 234 steps all the way to the top of the tower of the Lutheran Stadtkirche (city church) in the heart of town to blow his trumpet. Milter’s trumpet call, even
though he had once served in the German Wehrmacht during World War II, was not a call to arms, but a call to God. Day in and day out, rain or shine (or snow), aging Walter Milter made his pilgrimage twice a day. He climbed those stairs to the tower at 6:30 a.m. every morning and at 6 p.m.—Angelus Time—every evening. Over the town would float the sweet, dulcet tones of his brass trumpet. The tune was always some religious hymn.

You could almost set your watch by Milter's trumpet. But I had to say “almost” since in 1980 the painfully precise Walter suffered a heart attack, a coronary infarct. So he would be five to ten minutes “late” at times. The doctor had warned Milter that he should stop climbing those 234 steps twice daily. His doctor had warned him to relax. Walter evenly replied that if he should die, he would prefer to die in his tower—playing music for the Lord!

One misty and rainy dawn that June I went jogging around the old town determined to “ambush” Walter Milter when he descended from his tower. The clear and wonderful notes of his trumpet came right on the dot at 6:30 in the morning. It was Market Day and already the Schuhstrasse and the Brandplatz were abustle with vendors setting up their wares—instant gardens of green jars and technicolored flowers from petunias, begonias, chrysanthemums, to roses, tulips, pansies and violets, giant and juicy red strawberries (from Israel), Chiquita bananas from Panama, “Texas Star” oranges from the USA, green, yellow and red apples, Holland lemons, lettuce, carrots, artichokes, farm-fresh eggs at 26 pfennig apiece, highland potatoes and simple kartoffelen, pure honey from the local hives and jars of bee pollen (whatever for)—and, since May is asparagus time, tall stacks of bundled spargel at prices ranging from six to 13.50 Deutschmarks a kilogram. Rolling vans were noisily parking, setting up mobile butcher-shops, and pungent-smelling cheese stalls on wheels. The buses numbered 5, 6, and 9 were either parked or rumbling off on their appointed routes. The bus stop was at the foot of the church tower. The bored, waiting drivers in their blue-grey uniforms were scanning tabloids like the Bild Zeitung for the latest scandals, or thumbing through movie magazines.

Nobody looked up. No one seemed to listen. Walter's trumpet was, to Celle's citizens, as inevitable and ever-present as death and taxes, embedded in their subconscious. Truly, the philosopher Peter Altenberg once said, “God thinks within geniuses, dreams within poets,
and sleeps within the rest of us.” And yet, with certainty, God listened to Walter Milter. I encountered him as he emerged from the side-door of the church—an erect six-footer, vigorous-looking in his dark blue captain’s cap, blue topcoat, swinging his trumpet in its scuffed brown-leather case. I accosted him. He spoke no English and so our stilted conversation was conducted in my halting German. How long had he been climbing his tower? “Forty-five years,” he answered. He is a shy, taciturn man. How long did he plan to go on doing this? “As long as I can,” he soberly replied. Then he picked up his ration of bottled milk from a nearby doorstep, tucked it into a blue nylon bag, formally bent his head and waved goodbye, and turned a corner out of sight.

Milter, friends later informed me, was not a church elder or sexton subsidized by the church. He was a beamter, a civil servant, employed at city hall. Possibly he received a small stipend of “gratitude” from the church. His gesture was really a tribute to the Lord. Even when he was serving in German Wehrmacht, the army, during World War II, he would come home on leave as often as he could to blow his trumpet. This musical prayer must have worked. God protected Celle. Not a building was blasted by the American and RAF bombers which, in the final months of the war, with Hitler’s legions in full retreat, were darkening the skies with their bombs or brightening the night sky with their deadly flares. Thus Celle remains one of the best-preserved dream towns of Europe.

The only major casualty was the local military barracks and ammunition factory on the outskirts of town. This was because the German army instructed the town electrician and contractor who worked in the factory to blow it up before the Allied forces reached Celle. When the Yanks, the British and the Dutch marched in, they needed a barracks complex for themselves. Somebody pointed out that the electrical engineer who had demolished the compound had, in his possession, the original architectural plans for the old group of buildings. So, the Allies commandeered the same fellow to rebuild what he had just blasted to smithereens. They paid him well for the job, which he did it to everybody’s satisfaction.

I lost track of Walter Milter and his wonderful trumpet after that brief 1983 pilgrimage to Celle—but I’m certain that he continues to play his trumpet for God. If he’s done with his early stint, his bugle blows its golden tones in the chorus of Heaven. God bless you, Walter, for having shown us the pathway to God’s heart in this Vale of
Sorrows, uplifting our hearts with the power of your music—and your indomitable faith! *Gott mit uns,* “God is with us,” the Germans used to say in times of war. Thanks to men like Militer, God surely was even more gloriously with them, in the time of peace.

April 12, 2006

You’ve already heard aired on local television (on ANC, and introduced by our own Fr. James Reuter, S.J.), the first Easter Message, *Urbi et Orbi,* of the present reigning Pontiff, His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI. What’s significant is that the Holy Father was elected by the Conclave of Cardinals only a year ago, on 19 April 2005, succeeding the late Pope John Paul II. What sort of a Pope has he turned out to be? One of his biographers, Rupert Shorttt, Religion Editor of *The Times Literary Supplement* wrote of him in the introduction of the 2005 book entitled, *Benedict XVI: Commander of the Faith,* that “the familiar descriptions of him can seem discordant.” Shorttt recalled that the former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger “has been called wise, gentle and kind, a strict and sometimes harsh enforcer, a lofty mind, and a champion of simple believers. But none of these epithets is inaccurate. *The velvet glove and the iron fist are both authentic.*”

The flyleaf of Shorttt’s book is even more interesting. It says: “For decades before his election, Pope Benedict XVI was known across the world as an unwavering upholder of Catholic orthodoxy. Critics charged him with high-handedness, and even likened the Vatican department he ran to the (Soviet) KGB. His backers hailed him as a courteous, deeply intelligent figure whose concern to rein in liberalism and other forms of dissent appeared timely.” The book tries to explain why the future Pope “disavowed his youthful liberalism from the late 1960s onwards.”

The way I look at it (and, hey, I’m neither a religious thinker—the opposite, perhaps—nor a scholar of Vatican affairs, more fascinated by the sins of earlier Popes than the virtues of more recent ones) is that Papa Joseph Ratzinger is much in the same mold and much of the same cast of thinking as his great predecessor, the Polish Pope, whose charm captured the imagination of the world, just as he championed orthodoxy—truly the iron fist in the velvet glove, too.
Most people say that Pope John Paul II’s is a hard act to follow. This is true, and Papa Ratzi knows it. So he doesn’t even try. He just does his thing, which is, in less spectacular but still effective fashion, the very same intractable thing his predecessor and mentor did. Is it still a sin to use a condom, as the saintly John Paul II preached? That’s the theological question which still must be resolved. Are there more vocations to the priesthood today—or are the numbers of those seeking Holy Orders still shrinking? Is the Catholic Church advancing, or in retreat?

The German Shepherd of the flock, our Church, can’t be expected to work miracles in a single year, but it’s time to take stock. In any event, April is a significant month for the Holy Father: Joseph Ratzinger was born on 16 April 1927, in Bavaria. His first home (his father was a cop) was in Marktl am Inn, a village 60 miles east of Munich, within a triangle formed on two sides by the Inn and Salzach Rivers.

Germany has long been a battleground between the Protestantism of the great Martin Luther and the Roman Catholic Church a bloody battleground, indeed, prompting decades of war which in the past reduced the population of Germany by one half. Of the world’s Christians, half a million are Protestants inspired by the brilliant monk Luther’s “revolt” against Rome and his translation of the Bible and the Gospels into the kind of German the common folk could read and understand. But Bavaria has always been the bastion of the Catholic Faith—yet, ironically, Munich is where Adolf Hitler and his Nazis conducted their first, failed Putsch. This is the background against which Papa Joseph Ratzinger’s character must be studied.

The only Popes this writer was privileged to have met had very different characters. One of them was the one I most dearly loved, the wonderfully human Pope John XXII who hailed from Soto il Monte in Bergamo, where my wife Precious went to school for advanced Montessori. In the special audience in the Sistine Chapel, Pope John broke out in hiccups five or six times—already the pallor of his impending death was on his face. He had flung the windows of the Church open to ecumenism and the winds of change. He was truly saintly—and humble. All his work, including Vatican II was, of course, reversed by Pope John Paul II.

The other Pope was Paul VI, who my wife and I visited at his summer residence at Castelgandolfo in September 1970. Pope Paul
was a kindly Pontiff, but he was in a hurry to get rid of us since there were other people waiting. So, he gave my wife and me, too, a Rosary and blessed us. Then I mentioned we had three children who were also praying for him. He motioned to his secretary, an Irish priest with a twinkle in his eye, who quickly got out three holy medals. The Holy Father blessed the medals, and blessed our three children in absentia. He looked relieved to see us beginning to leave, but then I said that the Filipino people were praying for him also, so he got three stampitas from his assistant and said I should also give them to our children, then he blessed the Filipino people. I made as if to open my mouth to say something more, but catching the apprehensive look in his eye, I simply bent over to kiss his ring. He fervently blessed both of us again, obviously grateful for our imminent departure.

A special audience with John Paul II, that Polish superstar originally known as Karol Wojtyla was something else. (This was soon after the assassination attempt in St. Peter’s Square). It was orchestrated like a Broadway Show—with lights, camera, and action. These audiences used to be given every Wednesday to a cast of hundreds, including scores of giggling and twittering nuns who jumped up and down in excitement like a bunch of teenage groupies. One had to be careful not to be trampled by these enthusiastic Sisters who went into paroxysms of delight at the appearance of the Pontiff who exuded charm and charisma. That audience in the huge Sala Nervi was a spectacular never to be forgotten. The Poles in the audience would break into the hymn, “May You Live a Hundred Years!” Indeed, that courageous Pope who defied, then turned the tide against Communism in Eastern Europe—especially in his native Poland—almost did that. He almost lived that hundred years, but in the end, he, too, had to give up his mission and go to Heaven. God bless him—as well as sinners like me!

April 17, 2006

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When a columnist gets a heartwarming, inspiring letter from a reader, he can’t wait to share it with other readers—the heck with politics, planned protests and demonstrations, and other kinds of nonsense, which only serve to depress us as a nation.
This is one from Mrs. Violeta Queri Segismundo of SSS Village, Marikina City, and it is a gem:

Dear Mr. Soliven,

I was nostalgic while reading your column mentioning how the song “Heaven Watch the Philippines” came about.

The time was middle of 1945. I was one of the grade VI students of Dr. Alejandro Albert Elementary School in Dapitan St., Sampaloc who was brought to the grounds of Malacañan[g] to sing the song, which was taught to us by Mr. Irving Berlin himself. I still remember him, a little dark in complexion, a little short and very “bumbay” looking. He told us the story behind the song. He was with the USO group entertaining troops in Tacloban, Leyte when he heard children singing “God Bless the Philippines” to the tune of “God Bless America” which was composed by Mr. Berlin. He decided right there and then that he would compose a hymn exclusively for our country. Hence, “Heaven Watch the Philippines” was born!

I was lucky to be one of those students who sang the song for newsmen and guests on the grounds of Malacañan[g] sometime in June 1945. I can still sing the song from memory today.

I am Mrs. Violeta Queri Segismundo now almost 75 years old, and I treasure the memory.

This letter reminds us of how simple, earnest, and sincere most Filipinos were in those terrible days of war and privation. Of course, there were traitors, collaborators, greedy black marketeers, and abusive guerrillas during the last year of Japanese military occupation. War and suffering brought out both the best and the worst in men. After the war, there were also thousands of “fake guerrillas”—some of them former KALIBAPI and collaborators with the Japanese—who queued up to fill up counterfeit “rosters” of nonexistent guerrilla units in order to collect “back pay” from the American military and the US Veterans Administration.

In truth many who had joined the underground, to fight a guerrilla war against the harsh occupation of the enemy, some of them ex-
Bataaners, others civilians who took up arms (initially with captured Japanese rifles and weapons), never thought of back pay or reward. I remember the late Assemblyman Tomas Confesor, himself a guerrilla fighter, mourning: "When the Americans decided to give guerrillas 'back pay,' they robbed us of our finest hour! "Not everybody, of course, thought the same way as the gallant Confesor. Many members of the real Resistance had suffered much during the struggle, their families driven into the mountains fleeing vengeful Japanese patrols, and were sick and starving. To them, "Back pay" was a blessing, a chance to rebuild their shattered lives. It proved a bonanza, however, to legions of the undeserving. In the end, some highly-placed Americans began to regard Filipinos with scorn, treating even genuine veterans of the Resistance like they were "fakes." So, perhaps, in this light, Confesor was right. We were robbed of our finest hour.

My own mother who had been in the Underground was robbed in the same way, (mostly, she never mentioned it in her own autobiography, A Woman So Valiant—the title was not hers but given the book by her children). Anyway, when Liberation came, the Americans provided “back pay” to guerrillas and members of the Resistance, but somebody forged Mama’s signature on the “back pay” roster and collected what had been earmarked for her—literally robbing a war widow and nine orphans. Mama didn’t even shed a tear over her misfortune, although we surely could have used the money since we were living in a barong-barong. She had never fought for money. Seeing my anger and indignation, she said to me: “Son, remember this—you never put a price tag on what you do for your country.” Mama’s book, when we, her children, finally got together and published her handwritten manuscript two years ago became a bestseller. (It is currently being translated into Nihongo, because some Japanese have asked permission to publish it in Tokyo so that Japanese readers can learn something of what happened here during the War).

In any event, as Mrs. Segismundo so touchingly described it, the famous songwriter Irving Berlin (who composed not only “God Bless America”, but “I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas”, “Easter Parade”, and “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” and other memorable tunes) was so touched by what he saw while visiting newly-liberated Leyte and how the children were singing his own tune, simply changing the words to “God Bless the Philippines.” On the spot, he decided to honor Filipinos with a new song, composed by him, which he called “Heaven
Watch the Philippines.” The USO troupe with which Berlin travelled, also brought other renowned Hollywood and entertainment industry personalities like Bing Crosby, Bob Hope, Dorothy Lamour, and Betty Grable to entertain American servicemen fighting the war in Asia and Europe. But it was only here in the Philippines that one of them composed a song, just for us.

Berlin's words, “Heaven watch the Philippines, keep her safe from harm” ought to ring in our hearts in this time of trouble, hatred, and self-doubt. Like Mrs. Segismundo, I remember our country so poor, our towns and cities devastated and in ruins, most Filipinos in rags, destitute and undernourished even close to starvation but there was still a song in our hearts, and pride—and we brought our nation up from the ashes. Those who’re noisily complaining and griping today have no idea of what real suffering and economic setback means. There are too many crybabies in this land. What we need are doers and fighters—fighting for progress, not fighting among ourselves.

May 8, 2006

This nation’s daily diet of bad news, accusations and counter-accusations, political sniping and squabbling, loose talk about conspiracies, and other cuckoo (coup-coup) gossip, violence and mayhem in general, give the impression to local and foreigner alike that this island archipelago is in crisis. “Crisis”, if you watch television or read the domestic and foreign news, occurs everywhere each day in this turbulent planet of ours. Bombings in Iraq, sectarian killings, massacres in Darfur, riots in Paris, Hamas versus Fatah versus Israel in Palestine, un-solomonic overthrows in the Solomon Islands, South Korea versus Japan over a scatter of tiny islands (nationalism is a powerful force, never to be discounted—sometimes misunderstood); America’s Dubya Bush with added furrows on his brow; Tony Blair, gallantly aged by his travails, apparently in extremis. The only “happy” lands perhaps, are those not reached by television, the bloggers, or the electronic and print media.

a sumptuous official dinner in his honor. Henry turned to me and in
typical droll fashion, in his gutteral German accent which he studiously
cultivated even in Boston, asked me in a stage whisper heard halfway
down the table: “Max, is it true that the Filipinos are suffering a crisis
of identity?” To which I replied, “Of course not, Henry. We Ilocanos,
for example, have never doubted who we are!” I didn’t know then that
my own personal crisis was coming due. Almost exactly a year later, I
was arrested and put in prison at the outset of Martial Law.

What I’m trying to say is that people have troubles everywhere.
There is no blessed nation (even the Chosen People) who are
exempt. What’s vital is that nation keeps on striving to cope, to
right wrong, to banish evil and corruption, to foil the killers—
and punish the guilty. Defeat comes only when a people give up.
Indonesia’s founding President Sukarno sometimes made a mess
of things with his swaggering and unpredictable ways, but he was a
spellbinder on the public platform. He kept repeating one phrase
which sounds too flamboyant, but is true: “For a fighting nation there
is no journey’s end.”

Doubt not. For all our disappointments the Filipino people remain
optimistic and continue to struggle for the right, just as our boys
climbed Everest—reaching for our place in the sun. The self-pity and
doom and gloom of our skeptical, polluted cities, is not to be found in
the countryside. It’s not that the folk in little towns, in the provinces
and in the hills and mountains, have any fewer problems. But they have
faith in God, and in the promise of a better tomorrow. In my travels
here, I found the sunniest smiles among those who live in the dark
shadow of poverty. This is not consuelo de bobo but reality. In the midst
of squalor, hidden among the rags, the Filipino spirit shines. When our
family was very poor in the postwar era, having lost everything, we
were not miserably poor. Our widowed mother taught us never to feel
poor. She said that we should do our best, and God would do the rest.
Over the years, Mama was proven right.

May 22, 2006

An expatriate with the International Monetary Fund who for many
years has lived in Manila told me the other day that, economically
and financially, the Philippines is doing well enough for itself, so if our politicians would only “take a break” from their favorite pastime of savaging each other, and pay attention instead to our economy, this country could take a giant leap forward. To be sure, anyone with a good enough sense to praise Filipinos and the Philippines is immediately pilloried by noisy local critics, political insigheters, rightwing and leftwing nuisances, inquisitorial media persons, and professional doomsayers, for naively, in starry-eyed fashion, buying La Glorietta’s propagandists’ lines, so I withhold this person’s name, but not before saying he’s right. Despite our awful murder statistics—of journalists, militants, activists, and of ordinary people standing in the wrong place at the wrong time—we do quite well, and might actually be able to notice that we do if we stopped squabbling and badmouthing each other. Our OFWs routinely send home billions of dollars, euros, and what-have-you. Our underground economy—dare I mention it?—is barreling along. Yet we bend over backwards to derail the Pinoy locomotive for motives describable as loco-loco. The conventional wisdom is that if we’re feeling good there must be something wrong!

Take the hotel situation in Metro Manila, where the gripers congregate in the greatest number. They are full, and I’m not speaking of the 5-star, deluxe hostelries alone. Look at the 4-star, 3-star, 1-star, and no-star hotels, inns, and appartels. Believe you me, not only foreign visitors, but out-of-town locals as well, have to hustle to get a reservation. Tourists, businessmen, potential investors, curiosity-seekers, carpetbaggers, adventurers, and even excitement-hunters are all pouring in. As for our southern resorts: beautiful Boracay is packed to the gills. It could be doing even better with good political leadership. Investors have to put up with radical labor unions muscling their way in, with corrupt officials who willy-nilly issue to their rivals permits to build even when they’re certifiable bums and pickpockets. Yet they persist building! Thank God a new police chief is in place, of the “High Noon” type, who brooks no nonsense as he zips about energetically apprehending malefactors, even the “powerful,” no matter how loudly hysterical their political backers get.

What needs to be done, therefore, is to call a political truce, a time in which everybody can pull together instead of seek to tear out one another’s eyes. Add to it a strong dose of law and order, the political
will to deal out punishment for crime. By golly, we'd really be on our way. Is this doable? You bet. Will we do it? That's the question!

This recalls to my mind one of the most popular radio programs in my youth (aside from the great Lina Flor's immortal *Gulong ng Palad*—i.e. "Wheel of Fortune"). This was *Kuwentong Kutsero* (rig-driver tales), which pivoted about the daily life of Mang Teban, his family, his friends—each sounding like Everyman propounding his down-to-earth philosophy. It was written by the late Fr. Horacio "Skeezix" de la Costa, S.J. Among my favorite characters was *Mister Diskurso*, a bombastic type like you see being interviewed daily on our TV channels. Mister "Speech," literally, had one unforgettable line: "There are two kinds of *pipuls* (people) in *dis* world: the fools—and the ones who fool the fools." That describes the political scene today.

If we only got our act together, one is tempted to say. But that's the big IF.

Never mind the controversial cover story which was slugged, "Beyond the 'Da Vinci Code': The Mystery of Mary Magdalene." The current (May 29) issue of *Newsweek* Magazine, on page 34, has a timely article, "Lost in Translation" by their correspondent Marites Vitug. The subtitle of the article says it all: "*Poor English skills threatens the Philippines' dream of becoming a new call-center magnet in Asia.*" You bet. Vitug starts out with the premise: "With one out of 10 citizens unemployed, many of the country's best and brightest go off to work elsewhere in Asia, and the Middle East, and millions still living in poverty, the Philippines can boast few economic bright spots. One that the government has touted for years is outsourcing: Officially at least half of all Filipinos speak English, and low labor costs have given a boost to the so-called business-process-outsourcing (BPO) industry." As the magazine points out, "*Five years ago there were 10 call centers in the Philippines; today there are 108 employing 200,000 Filipinos, mostly in their mid-20s. Last year the industry generated $2.3 billion in revenues—up $1 billion over 2004—and analysts expect an additional $1 billion jump in sales this year. Call centers account for about 80 percent of the players in the BPO industry.*"

The article reports that in a recent speech, *La Presidenta*—while inaugurating a Dell call center in Manila—*predicted that up to 2 million Filipinos will be employed in such places by 2010. That's speculating"
that there will be a tenfold increase over the present numbers, Ms. Vitug noted. Such a development would employ 2 percent of the entire population. But whoa! as a cowboy might say. Newsweek stresses that “down in the trenches, the burgeoning BPO industry is already encountering growing pains—serious ones.” It pinpoints the problem: “Many call centers can’t keep up with demand because they can’t find enough employees who speak ‘proper’ English.” “For every 100 people who apply in the call centers, only three to five are accepted,” says Mitch Locsin, executive director of the Business Processing Association of the Philippines. Most are rejected because of poor English communication skills—”a sad situation for a country that was an American colony for 50 years and is a bastion of English in Asia.”

It can be argued by cynics that English isn’t spoken in America anymore, either—but that would be misleading and facetious. Indeed, it’s true, that my daughter’s Cuban-born father-in-law lived in the United States since the 1960s, having fled the depredations of Fidel Castro’s regime, but up to now speaks only Spanish. The Hispanic population is burgeoning (to use the same word) in the Estados Unidos, it might be noted. But that doesn’t get us out of our predicament. Millions of jobs are available for Filipinos, if most of us spoke enough “proper” English to fill the hungry demand of mushrooming Call Centers!

Vitug quotes Rainerio Borja, who heads PeopleSupport, “one of the country’s largest and most profitable call-center operations,” as pointing to “a burst of nationalism 20 years ago as the cause of the problem.” He said there was “a push to institutionalize Tagalog as the medium of learning in all schools . . . Rightly or wrongly, our leaders were doing this to get away from our long colonial past and establish our country’s own identity.” He was very kind, I think. Why didn’t he just say that Tita Cory, former President Corazon C. Aquino, and her bunch killed both English—and (already dying) Spanish! Spanish used to be a required subject for two years in college, but La Corazon abolished this.

Admittedly, Spanish instruction was fading on the vine, because too many of the teachers were only three chapters ahead of their bored students. The last Spanish daily, Voz de Manila (Voice of Manila), had already died. There used to be two excellent Spanish dailies, the prewar La Vanguardia by the Roces TVT group (Manila Times, Vanguardia, Taliba) and El Debate by the DMHM (Debate-Manila
Herald-Mabuhay). Dad and Mama subscribed to them and perused them daily, since Papa's languages were Ilocano, Spanish and, very late, in the UP College of Law, he learned English. But Cory axed the already staggering tongue of Madre España and Cervantes! Que lastima! Then, she rejected English. The Palace in 1986 decreed that henceforth all government communications and declarations be in Tagalog (Wikang Pambansa). It further decreed that the language of instruction in all schools be Tagalog. English ain't spoken in this archipelago any more. What was wrong with speaking and using both English and Tagalog? Is it “Nationalism”? More likely, chauvinism had reared its head.

As a Saluyot from northernmost Ilocoslovakia, where we speak Ilocano, there was a time when every Ilocano and everyone in the Mountain provinces spoke excellent English. In Vigan, where the founder of the trade union movement was born, labor leaders in their conventions insisted on speaking English and delivering their speeches in English. (They didn't have to prove that they spoke Ilocano in their everyday lives). They had no "crisis of identity." The most populous language group (out of our 87 languages and dialects), the Cebuano-speaking millions of Visayas and Mindanao, accepted English as their lingua franca.

Of course, Tagalog is great. The language of Balagtas, of our musical classics, of the river-people, the Taga-ilog, was selected to be our National Language. That's fine. Many Tagalog like Jose Rizal, Andres Bonifacio, Emilio Aguinaldo, M. H. del Pilar—led the movement toward freedom, but this was true of all Filipinos from north to south. Yet, sad was the day when we abandoned English. Language is power, and we had stripped ourselves of two of our “powers,” the English and Spanish languages. Taglish? Neither fish nor fowl. To give her credit, GMA in her first term declared that our schools must go back to English. This, she discovered, was easier said than done. We were the bastion of English in Asia. Now, our neighbors—including English desperately (even the Chinese)—are passing us by.

Malaysia's former Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Muhammad had led the charge to make Bahasa Melayu the official tongue in Malaysia's schools. He had the wisdom, the guts, and the clout, to reverse the trend and mandate a posthaste return to English, even as
he was the champion of the Bumiputra cause. How will we do it here? Our 8.5 million OFWs got their overseas jobs by speaking English, even, in some places, passably good English of sorts. Let's bring that language home.

May 25, 2006

Yesterday, we honored the revolutionary Filipino writer and hero, Marcelo H. Del Pilar, on the occasion of his 156th birth anniversary by laying two wreaths at his statue. The monument is located in Plaza Plaridel, part of the former Paraíso ng Batang Maynila, just across the street from the Manila Zoo. Perhaps the proximity of the statue of our journalistic icon, the leader of the Propaganda Movement against Spanish Friar abuse and the heavy-hand of colonial rule, to the Zoo is serendipity. For, as the now caged animals in the zoo used to fight for survival in the jungle, we live in an asphalt, concrete and chrome jungle in which only the fittest and most powerful (and most courageous) can survive.

Marcelo Hilario Del Pilar y Gatmaitan, to whom we paid tribute yesterday, was a native of Bulacan. When he was studying Law, he and a bunch of youthful student radicals started the first Tagalog-Spanish newspaper in the Philippines, the Diaryong Tagalog. Del Pilar took the battle, eventually, to Spain itself. As editor-in-chief, he established a journal in Spanish to promote Filipino aspirations, along with our other outspoken writers, Jose Rizal, Graciano Lopez Jaena (of Iloilo), Mariano Ponce and Pablo Rianzares. The publication, La Solidaridad, was published in Barcelona.

In any event, this writer, as Chairman of the Samahang Plaridel, and Manila Mayor Jose “Lito” Atienza Jr. who had helped us in renaming the Plaza and setting up a monument to our hero, did the usual thing—lay wreaths and give short speeches on the occasion.

By way of background, our association, which we proudly dubbed (hopefully not conceitedly) the Samahang Plaridel—a band of brothers (and sisters) in media—when we set out on this adventure, has only one goal: to promote excellence in journalism in order to serve the best interests of our nation. We registered it with the Securities and Exchange Commission on 3 October 2003, with the following . . .
oh well, somewhat hi-faluting statement of purposes: (1) To uphold the freedom of the press and the dignity of our journalism profession; (2) to promote camaraderie, cooperation and understanding among journalists, particularly those who have been practitioners for 20 years or more; and (3) to work for the advancement of the journalistic profession. In a few months, it was decided that the 20-years-of-experience rule be relaxed to welcome younger newspapermen, media persons, and journalists into the fold. I hope in some way, our Samahang Plaridel will be able to infuse new dynamism into a calling which was in danger of sliding down into cynicism—and pessimism.

We derived our name, of course, from the nom de plume and nom de guerre chosen when he penned his revolutionary writings, by our hero of the written word, the great nationalist M. H. del Pilar. "Plaridel" was the name he selected. Del Pilar so passionately believed in the principle of liberty for the Filipino that he underwent untold sacrifices in order to mobilize a Propaganda Movement for our freedom. He died penniless and starving of the killer disease of that time—tuberculosis—in Barcelona, Spain: a fighter to the very end. "Plaridel" and our national hero Jose Rizal, also an icon of revolutionary literature, and finally a martyr to freedom's cause, did not always see eye to eye. Indeed, they quarreled over ideas and the composition of La Solidaridad often enough. In the end the two "broke" away from each other. Yet their hearts beat as one: that the Filipino learns to be proud of himself, and shake off the shackles of Colonial and despotic Friar rule.

We are happy as an organization, with the cooperation of Mayor Lito Atienza, to have gotten a Plaza in Manila named after "Plaridel", and erected a monument to him on that spot. However, statues are only symbolic. What is essential is what del Pilar taught us: to strive to do our best, and be our best, in the service and in the defense of our people. We honor the writers and journalists who have gone before us to blaze the way. We stand shoulder to shoulder in the present fight.

Among the writings that inspired another of our heroes, the founder of the Katipunan, Ka Andres Bonifacio, to cry out for liberty—the Sigaw ng Pugadlawin or Balintawak (take your pick)—were the novels of the French writer Alexander Dumas. Among the revolutionary Supremo's favorites was The Three Musketeers, which also caught my imagination in my callow schoolboy years. Their unforgettable motto has grown famous among moviegoers who enjoyed and were thrilled
by four motion picture versions of the tale of the doughty, sword-flashing Musketeers: "One for all—and all for one!" If we Filipinos, like Bonifacio, only took that pledge to heart, and made it our own, we would be a nation proud and strong.

August 31, 2006

I do wonder why China routinely commemorates the death anniversary of its former "Great Helmsman" Mao Zedong. Is the idea to honor him, or to express some kind of subliminal relief that he died at ten minutes past midnight on the morning of 9 September 1976—before he managed to destroy China entirely. Sure, in Beijing, as in the rest of the People's Republic of China, exists a great deal of nostalgic "kitsch" relating to Mao. I myself am an inveterate collector of Mao stamps, Mao posters, figures, and all that stuff.

The late Chairman Deng Xiaoping, the man who really turned China around with his Four Modernizations and his doctrine of pragmatic market socialism (symbolized by his famous assertions, such as "to get rich is glorious" and "it doesn't matter what color the cat is as long as it catches mice"), personally detested Mao. He had been humiliated, brutalized, and even had his life threatened, in the frenzy of the Cultural Revolution. Red Guards had even hurled Deng's son, Deng Pu-fang, out of an upstairs window, crippling him permanently.

Deng's government, however, has draped a huge portrait of Mao Zedong over the entrance to the Forbidden City, its stern eyes staring out over the vastness of Tiananmen Square before it, with hundreds of tourist cameras popping at it. In his Mausoleum at the far end of the Square, Mao himself, his remains, that is, lie in state—mummified, really, like Vladimir Ilyich Lenin in Moscow's Red Square—"sleeping" beneath the starry red flag of his country, as thousands of Chinese and foreign tourists troop past it daily.

I guess it is because Mao serves conveniently as the poster boy of the Chinese Communist Party's continuing and exclusive grip on power. Still it must not be forgotten that, in emulation of his one-time friend and rival, the murderous Joseph Stalin (their relationship
dated back to the 1920s), Mao Zedong was behind the deaths of 38 million people who perished in the greatest famine in history, brought on by his demented Great Leap Forward. In all, more than 70 million Chinese died under Mao’s rule—in peacetime, mind you, not in war. He did wage war, as when he sent the People’s Liberation Army against the Americans, South Koreans and their Allies in the Korean War in 1950–1953, loosing as a consequence his favorite son.

I managed to travel throughout much of China in the Mao era, from Guangzhou to Beijing, Hangzhou, Shanghai, Shenyang (Mukden), and so forth, finding the people having to live in those lands under exceedingly miserable conditions. Everybody dressed alike and looked alike in their drab Mao jackets (which made men and women look like clones of each other). Everybody waved the little Red Book as one might the Bible or the Koran. In the end, Mao fueded with and destroyed all his Marshalls and fellow “Long Marchers.” Only Premier Zhou En-lai survived, to keep China moving at all, having reassured Mao he would forever be a loyal Number Two. One biographer, described the Mao of that period as “The Emperor of the Blue Ants.” Mao’s doctor finally revealed in a book how Mao never brushed his teeth, and was a serial lecher, fancying and grabbing young girls as he travelled along, and keeping dozens of wives and mistresses. Of the more than fifteen books on Mao I’ve read, the most interesting was that which recently came out, Mao: The Unknown Story, by a former Red Guard, Jung Chang, who wrote it together with her husband, Jon Halliday (Jonathan Cape, London, 2005). Oh well. In 1949, when Mao proclaimed the victory of Communism in Tiananmen Square, he and his peasant armies did change the world—and China, unified by force, began its painful march—bleeding all the way—toward superpower status in the 21st century. For that, we can credit Mao Zedong.

September 10, 2006

Here we are today, on the fifth anniversary of the terrible al-Qaeda terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in New York, and the Pentagon in Washington DC—and nobody seems to care or mourn any more. How treacherous amnesia can be, and a danger to our safety.
When those nineteen Arab terrorists—fifteen of them Saudis (would you believe?)—hijacked four fully-filled commercial airliners, and crashed three of them with terrible loss of life into their targets, the shock waves of horror and sympathy travelled all over the planet.

Yet, I’ve heard some Muslims, in an indignant state of denial, arguing incomprehensibly that it had not been an Islamic terrorist act but a “Jewish conspiracy.” I heard this in Saudi Arabia, in Dubai, in Bahrain, and right here in Manila from an otherwise intelligent Lebanese executive. The monstrous tall tale, which I found had been long circulated on the Internet and several websites, was that “3,000 Jews had deliberately not gone to work in the Twin Towers that fateful morning, and so did not perish, having been forewarned of the “Zionist plot.” This only bears out the old Tagalog proverb that “the one hardest to wake up is the one only pretending to be asleep.” Sanamagan. Had I not known several Jewish firms in the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center which had been cruelly decimated when the Towers collapsed, and, personally, a couple of the dead Jewish executives, I might have given that silly “conspiracy theory” a second thought. But, by golly, hasn’t al-Qaeda’s bearded Prophet of Destruction, Osama bin Laden, been bragging about that awful crime for the past five years? Enough said on the matter.

By the way, I think it was wrong of Cable News Network and Christiane Amanpour to have glorified Osama in repeated telecasts regarding his “life” and “mission” over the past few days. CNN ought to have left that Osama-hallelujah stuff to the Arab network, Al-Jazeera, based in the Kingdom of Qatar, which, since its inception in 1996, has become the modern-day prophet and chronicler of jihad and quondam conduit for the ratings of Osama bin Laden, who gives it “scoops” galore. Indeed, recently our government even appealed to Al-Jazeera to transmit messages to our OFWs living amidst shot and shell in Lebanon during the 34-day war, on the premise that every ear in the Islamic Middle East is tuned in on that network. Al-Jazeera’s commentators and correspondents, for instance have been calling Palestinian suicide-bombers shuhada, or martyrs—certainly not “terrorists”—which just goes to show that in reporting it’s sometimes a matter of attitude.

People used to ask each other: “What were you doing when the planes hit the Twin Towers on 9/11?” I was in my hotel room in the
Hyatt Union Square in San Francisco that morning, watching “Shrek” on my in-house paid television ($11.00), which was why I was reluctant to change channels when my secretary rang me up to switch to BBC, CNN, Fox News, or CBS, because a plane had just ploughed into a Tower of the World Trade Center. “It can’t be real!” I said, “it’s just a re-run of an old Hollywood movie.” My curiosity picqued, however, I did change channels a few minutes later (lost my investment in the “Shrek” movie) just in time to see the second plane crash—captured by TV camera—into the second Tower. My Cuban-American son-in-law Bob, who works as a supervisor on the New Jersey piers, saw it without benefit of television—with the naked eye. He and his work crew were surprised by sound the first impact, which could be clearly seen across the narrows and the Bay, then were shocked to witness a second airliner smash into the second Tower. A bit later, TV told us that United Airlines 93—which earlier took off from Newark, New Jersey—had crashed in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. (Its passengers had bravely tried to wrestle control of the plane from the hijackers). That’s when I realized I wouldn’t get to Newark, NJ, and New York City the following morning, as scheduled. UA 93 was the plane I should have taken at 6:30 a.m. the next day, as UA 94.

Everybody’s been focused since September 11, 2001, on what happened at the Twin Towers, which dramatically collapsed into dust, rubble and melted girders. The death toll was close to 3,000. American Airlines flight 77, also a Boeing 757 like the others, had been hijacked, too, this time from Washington airport. One wonders up to now why the Pentagon, the nerve center of American military might, had no “magic” air defense or early-warning system. In any event, AA-77, travelling at about 530 miles per hour, slammed into the limestone western wall of the Pentagon building, the side facing Arlington Cemetery. The time was 9:37 a.m. The plane penetrated the first three rings of the huge Pentagon structure, but caused damage to all five of the building’s concentric sections. The plane specifically hit between the first and second floors, destroying offices like the Defense Intelligence Agency. One hundred twenty-five men and women of the Pentagon died in the explosion and succeeding fuel-ignited conflagration.

You cannot imagine, from the outsider’s standpoint, how immense the Pentagon is: five sides, five stories, five rings by alphabet, four moats, seven spokes, triple the square footage of New York’s Empire
State Building, covering 30 full acres, a mile in circumference, with 17 and a half miles of looping corridors, eighteen dining rooms (serving 60,000 meals a day); two barber shops; a drugstore, a vaccination clinic, five "beverage bars", six hundred drinking fountains. American Airlines Flight 11 (hijacked in Boston) and United Airlines 197 brought the Twin Towers down. American Flight 77 devastated the Pentagon which the author James Carroll in his bestselling book calls, the "House of War." The damaged portions were rebuilt within 16 months after the outrage, but the Pentagon has lost its mystique of being impregnable and mighty. US President George W. Bush—who had an approval rating of 90 percent in the first rush of adrenalin and anger after 9/11—wrote movingly a year after the tragedy: "We are a different Nation today; sadder and stronger, less innocent and more courageous, more appreciative of life."

It took my friends and me, originally scheduled to fly to the Eastern seaboard on 12 September, six days of delay in San Francisco—all aircraft had been grounded, all airports shut down. It was a week before I got to New York—and went to Ground Zero to see the smoking ruins, and pray for the dead. The delay obviously saved us from what is now feared to be a new, dread disease. An editorial in last Thursday's (Sept. 7) International Herald Tribune, probably published simultaneously in its mother daily, The New York Times spoke of the "other victims of Sept. 11." It turns out that many among the estimated 40,000 persons who rushed to help after the attack on the World Trade Center five years ago, "are now sick or even dying." The editorial said those affected include "not only New York firefighters, police officers, ironworkers and neighborhood volunteers but also communications workers from Chicago and rescuers from California." They rallied from all over the country to work on "the pile", trying to save those deemed—hopelessly it turned out—alive under the rubble, or clear the site by helping transport the rubble in more than 187,000 truckloads to "Fresh Kills" on Staten Island. Many of these generous people are today gravely ill. They failed to obtain the proper "breathing masks" or were misled by assurances that the toxic fumes were not dangerous.

The toll exacted by Osama's terrorists continues to rise. What an irony. America's superpower might has hardly made it invulnerable. Americans spend nearly $400 billion of their tax dollars on defense every year, yet they still have to take their belts and shoes off, and have their luggage rifflled through and inspected, everytime they have to
hurdle security to board an airplane. Osama and the other Islamic terrorists have changed the manner in which the world lives—and revised lifestyles, for the worse, not for the better. This is the revenge they have exacted not just on “crusaders” (Christians and other Infidels) and “Zionists” (Israelis and Jews). Saddest of all, most Americans seem to have lost the fervor they acquired in response to the outrage of 9/11. At every gathering, baseball game, or Mass in September 2001, and the months thereafter, the crowd would inevitably burst into patriotic song—their favorite was Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America.” What stirring weeks those were—which I managed to witness in the USA—before I came home to Manila. After the disappointment of Afghanistan, and the vicissitudes of Iraq, I’ve heard they sing no more. It’s a pity. That upsurge of national spirit was a sight to behold.

Bush, for his part, has seen his approval rating drop to zilch. In Britain his closest ally Prime Minister Tony Blair—having aged visibly ten years—has look of anxiety and defeat on his face, and a tentativeness of manner has replaced his once jaunty swagger. He’s even had to promise to resign within a year. Just because he joined Mr. Bush in the “liberation” of Iraq. I’ve always admired Tony Blair, and continue to do so, but I guess he’s had it. Gordon Brown and the Labour Party’s hard lining trade unions ought not to gloat, however. Blair brought Labour to power nine years ago by hijacking the agenda of the Tories and the Conservatives, presenting Britons with Socialism with an Oxford-accent and a human face. Blair may now have become a political liability—but without Blair, the Labourites could lose the coming elections. America’s most charismatic President John F. Kennedy (at the height of his golden boy popularity) remarked that “life is not fair.” An assassin’s bullets in Dallas, a year later, proved him right. Life, truly, is not fair. And you’d better believe it.

September 11, 2006

Almost all the writers of adventure and espionage novels, who used to concentrate on other kinds of plots, like the Cold War and the Soviet-American confrontation, now specialize in themes centering on Islamic jihad, the fight versus global terror, and the wars in Iraq and

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Afghanistan. Among them have been my favorite and most "muscular" authors, Chris Ryan (Ultimate Weapon) and Andy McNabb, both former SAS men who walk the walk and talk the talk.

The most famous of all espionage novelists remains, of course, the ageless Frederick Forsyth, some of whose bestsellers have been made into successful movies, like The Day of the Jackal and The Odessa File. Forsyth also penned The Dogs of War, Avenger and The Devil's Alternative. His latest, The Afghan (Bantam Press, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland, 2006), was so riveting it cost me two sleepless nights. In this exciting volume, which quickly vanished from the shelves, Forsyth writes of our homegrown terrorists, the Abu Sayyaf, as essential foot soldiers (excuse me, sea-pirates, too) in the Islamic terrorist struggle. In his plot, they play a role in hijacking freighters, one of which is targeted to plough into a major American port with a full load of lethal LPG—a seagoing missile rendered almost "invisible" by a clever dodge designed by al-Qaeda and old Osama. To tell you more would be to give the storyline away and rob prospective readers of their enjoyment. Therefore, I say no more, except to quote a few passages—which ring true-to-life—incidentally from Forsyth's book: "Every year, between the Malacca Strait in the west and the Celebes Sea to the east, there are over five hundred pirate attacks on merchant shipping and up to a hundred hijackings. Occasionally the crew are ransomed back to the ship owners; sometimes they are all killed and never heard of again; in those cases the cargo is stolen and sold on the black market . . .”

In the novel, the ship "scheduled" by al-Qaeda's operatives to be seized is the Java Star, a freighter under a Norwegian skipper bound from Brunei to Fremantle, Western Australia. The captain's course took him round the northernmost tip of Sabah and the island of Borneo, to run southeast for the Sulu archipelago. "He intended," Forsyth narrated, "to move between the coral and jungle islands by taking the deep-water strait between Tawitawi and Jolo Islands. South of the islands it was a clear run down the Celebes Sea to the south and eventually Australia." Boy, that fellow Forsyth had certainly researched his geography.

The ship's departure from Brunei had been watched, and a coded phone call made regarding a fictitious "sick uncle" who would be "out of the hospital in twelve days." The novel said: "The call was taken in a creek on Jolo Island" and the man who took it learned from the code that within 12 hours the vessel would be passing his "ambush"
sector. "The twelve men he commanded in the velvety tropical night," the novelist recounted, "were cut-throats but they were well paid and would stay obedient. Criminality apart, they were also Muslim extremists. The Abu Sayyaf movement of the southern Philippines, whose last peninsula is only a few miles from Indonesia on the Sulu Sea, has the reputation of including not only religious extremists, but also killers for hire. The two speedboats they occupied put to sea at dawn, took position between the two islands and waited . . . ."

The "Java Star" sailed innocently into their trap. The Norwegian captain had handed the tiller over to his Indonesian first officer and gone below decks. "The first thing the Indonesian officer saw was a pair of speedboats racing up astern, one each side. Dark, barefoot, agile men leaped effortlessly from speedboat to deck and ran aft towards the superstructure and bridge where he stood . . . Then there was a knife at his throat . . . ."

Everyone who recalls the hostage drama, in which the murderous ASG kidnapped Martin and Gracia Burnham and a score of other hostages from the Dos Palmas resort, knows of this speedboat tactic of the Abu Sayyaf. Indeed, a German friend once narrated to me how he had been a guest on a British-owned yacht that was almost hijacked in the same manner in the Sulu Sea. It had been full of divers bound for the coral reefs of the southern Philippines—but when the vessel got to the Sulu Sea, the same kind of speedboat bumped alongside and "agile" Taosug "pirates" had jumped on board armed to the teeth. Unfortunately for them, the ship's master, a former military man, had kept a machine-pistol in his cabin as one of his service souvenirs. Without hesitation, he had dived below to get it—and come out on deck his submachinegun raking the surprised intruders. My friend can't recall whether any of the attackers were badly hit, but they all dived overboard—and the yacht steamed on, turning course to get away. The attackers, whether ASG or plain ordinary Taosug pirates engaged in their 300-year-old profession, didn't pursue, indicating they had been hurt and stymied in their "shanghai" attempt. But that's the reality in the Sulu Sea, the Celebes Sea and the Straits of Malacca.

Forsyth, renowned for his accuracy of detail in every novel, rightly tagged the ASG's role in the network of terror. If you're lucky, you'll find a copy of this novel—probably through the internet—and read it with both profit and pleasure. The writer tells it like it is. The reality,
too, is that our Marines, our Scout Rangers, our Infantrymen and other AFP personnel are down there in Sulu, chasing Khadaffy Janjalani and his Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist cohorts—and fighting, dying, and killing Abu’s and other terrorists, too. To be sure, our soldiers are somewhat bitter about the overblown publicity regarding the alleged 741 “extrajudicial” murders and killings of so-called activists, militants, journalists, and other individuals. Why 741? They ask. Where did that figure come from? But most of all, they’re aggrieved that when soldiers and policemen die in battle, “nobody” seems to care. “Doesn’t the public value our lives, too?” soldiers and marines ask me. “We bleed and die, but all we get in the media is criticism—and some reports make some of us sound like butchers.” This is something, believe me, we ought to heed.

I’m not talking about just-retired Maj. Gen. Jovito Palparan—whom La Presidenta has given a job as deputy secretary for “counterinsurgency” (not “deputy national security advisor” as indignantly denied by National Security Adviser Norberto Gonzales himself). I guess Palparan was awarded the post so he can defend himself from the New People’s Army, the Communist rebels, who have vowed to kill him, and have called him “a dead-man walking.” Sanamagan. The activists, militants and leftists complain about being assassinated—but they’re not reluctant about loudly announcing whom they’re planning to assassinate themselves. It’s not a one-way traffic. Those who live by the gun—remember the old axiom?—will die by the gun. Germany’s Iron Kanzler Otto von Bismark said that “war is politics with bloodshed, politics is war without bloodshed.” In the Philippines, alas, it is sometimes both combined.

September 12, 2006

Yesterday’s front-page streamer headline stated that the US Department of Labor has said children under the age of 18 have been recruited into terrorist organizations here, including the Abu Sayyaf and the Communist New People’s Army. This assertion is part of the U. S. agency’s report on “child labor” throughout the world. Our own government sources note that more than 10 percent of the
armed fighters of the NPA are minors belonging to the above category. The fact is that we didn’t need the U. S. Department of Labor to reveal to us what has been known for years about the insurgency. Rebel cadres recruit kids by giving them guns, which endow them with a sense of power. To the barrio youngsters, or those from depressed areas, the prospect of swaggering around with a sidearm or rifle is irresistible. What makes child “guerrillas” or cadres dangerous is that they have no qualms about killing, and also consider themselves “invincible.” Death is what happens to other people, not to them. If you watch cable TV and the global news networks, you surely witnessed countless newsreels about children being dragooned into fighting in the ranks of rebel forces in Africa. This is true in the Philippines, too—and neither the NPA nor Moro insurgent leaders have to “force” them to join.

When we were covering the Vietnam War, as well as the fighting in Cambodia, we journalists were constantly on the look-out for child-cadres among the Viet Cong or the Khmer Rouge. In combat, they were always the most merciless. To them, killing the enemy was child’s play. Newsmen and photographers I knew in Vietnam, all of them veterans of that conflict, always cautioned newcomers to think twice before “surrendering” if they spotted kids or youngsters in the group of Viet Cong they encountered. The child-guerrillas were the most likely to shoot if you came out of the brush or the treeline with your hands up, calling out “bao chi”, meaning “journalist.” The older cadres were more careful. In our country, kids in urban areas play all those violent video games, and come to believe that those knocked down in the “game” spring back to life after the game ends, ready to resume fighting when a new game is punched in. This, however, doesn’t happen in real life—but those city kids, their instincts already inured to violence don’t care.

Of course the NPA recruits children—not merely as fighters but as assassins. Who would expect an innocent-looking kid of planning to shoot one in the back? One egregious example is the Palestinian suicide-bomber, who doesn’t decide on a “martyrdom” attack on Israelis on the impulse or fervor of the moment, but is actually “prepared” from childhood for his mission for Allah. One of them, a youth named “Ali” recounted his story to Joyce M. Davis, the Deputy Foreign Editor of the Knight Ridder newspapers. Ali said that as a boy and teenager, he spent several weeks each year in marching, singing patriotic songs, and gaining skill in shooting Kalashnikovs (AK-47 rifles).