A WORD coined early in the 1950s, siga-siga, identifies the decade, so brash and braggart indeed, the first years of which were the last of President Elpidio Quirino. Those were the years when teen-ager became us wide a noise as graft-'n'-corruption or dissident. Later, in mid-decade, would come nationalist, as busy a vocable in the days when round Mr. Recto, a has-been come back as culture hero, converged the accusers of Wicked Stepmother America. But in the early '50s the butt was Palace rather than Empire, and the militant were still just liberals or good democrats or civil libertarians—at worst, parlor pinks. If suspect, on the one hand, as the Huk’s fellow travelers (especially during the politburo raids of 1951) they were, on the other hand, indubitably allied with the American embassy, then the protector of Laurel and Recto in the crusade against a regime whose axiom, as phrased by a top mogul, was: “What are we in power for?” Never so droll were Philippine contradictions as during this period when Huk paired with collaborator, and Filipinos of good will crusaded under American auspices to bring on what was to be the most puppet of all Philippine administrations.

The country was then as rent by civil strife as Korea or Vietnam; but the apogee of the Huk rebellion was also when the elite revived elegance in such traditional pomp as the Kahirup ball. The dissidents were always being rumored to be at the gates of Manila, but haute couture had already arrived and the Huk years can be tagged as the year of the panuelofless, the year of the draped skirt, the year of the erinoline, the year of the sheath. The early '50s were certainly the time of the jukebox, then the new artifact, and round the jukebox (as, a bit later, round the pinball machine) congregated the newborn social estate: the teen-ager—girls in ponytail, sandals and pedal-
pushers; boys in blue jeans, white shirt with long sleeves rolled up the wrist, and rubber shoes laced only halfway so the tongues could hang out. In those days when, besides a golden chamber pot and a fabled bed, the President was supposed to have a secret hole to flee to when the Huk's entered Manila, the air twanged to the sinister strains of the Third Man Theme; but from the teen-agers resounded the jollier noise of 'Come-On-A-My-House' and 'If I'd Known You Were Coming I'd-A-Baked A Cake'. The middle-aged swung to 'Loveliest Night of the Year' (the tune that children of the '20s had ridden the carousel to) and 'Tennessee Waltz'. Bing Crosby and Sinatra were getting their cool spoilt by Mario Lanza hammering up 'Be My Love' and by Johnny Ray extravagantly having his 'Cry'. The love goddesses were Rita Hayworth and Ava Gardner; Bogart was vintage; Marlon Brando had just shot up on the horizon; and in 1953 a country still Huk-imperiled showed itself siga by putting on an international fair. This was on the eve of the Magsaysay era and, like an omen, the fair featured a huge replica of the Americans' Liberty Bell. Teen-agers rated the fair an event because Xavier Cugat came over for it, with his band, and brought back the apachiguaco.

For Ninoy Aquino the early '50s were siga years too. He had become a star reporter, No. 7 in the Times line-up ("I started there as No. 33") and the specialist in war and foreign news. He had been appointed the diplomatic beat. Not only at the office was he a glamour figure but also on the UP campus, where, in law school, his class mates or contemporaries included Fenny Hechanova, Luis Mauricio, Johnny Ponce Enrile and Rafael Salas. A loner no more, Ninoy now went out in society. The Manila carnival had been revived, along with the Miss Philippines contest; and because his boss's wife, Mrs. Joaquin Roces, was always in charge of the beauty contest, Ninoy found himself, as the only young bachelor on the staff, being drafted year after year to escort the reigning Miss Philippines. He had been a professional Constantino as a boy; now he was a professional consort — the consort of Bessie Ocampo and Baby Villareal during their respective reigns as beauty queen. In 1953, for the international fair, Cristina Galang was Miss Philippines, and Ninoy as usual acted as consort, but there were rumors that this time he was serious about his role. Actually, Ninoy then had his eye not on Cristina but on her sister Nena; it was, however, only a tentative eye. Among the reigning beauties at the international fair (besides top guest Armi Kuwsela, the first Miss Universe) was a girl from Leyte, Imelda Romualdez, whose title was Muse of Manila. Though they shared a relative (Imelda's cousin Pacio Romualdez was Ninoy's aunt) this was the first time that Ninoy met the future Mrs. Marcos. She impressed him as being very pretty, very charming — "but too tall for me." For which reason he could not dance with her. But the two of them became good friends and they saw a lot of each other during 1953. If Ninoy was not yet ready to fall in love, one reason would be that he was too busy. As though being "a student by day, a journalist at night" wasn't enough, he was forever plunged into extra-activities: movie-making, roving commission tours, political hoopla. But his distinction was still as the boy wonder of the Philippine press. In 1951, four months after returning from Korea, he had justified his star status by coming up with the scoop of the year, a news report that would make history.

The horrors of the 1949 elections had caused so general a revulsion that a repeat in 1951 could have wrecked the Republic. The cry for clean polls in 1951 called into being the National Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) and would result in the ROTC boys being fielded for the first time to police the polls. Public wrath had become civic militancy; but despite this warning that 1951 could be the step from revulsion to revolution, the ruling Liberal Party seemed to be preparing a repeat of 1949 — as Ninoy observed when the Times sent him on an investigative tour of the South during the October semestral vacation, just a month before the polls. The administration was fielding its biggest names (Juan Pajo, Teodoro Evangelista, Pio Pedroza, José P. Bengzon) but everywhere he went Ninoy found public feeling rabid against the regime. Quirino's candidates could win only through another poll swindle; and the signs were that in Lanao the flora and fauna would vote again, and that in Negros Occidental, bloody fiefdom of Governor Rafael Lacson, the filmflam would be grimmer. If the 1951 elections proved to be a surprise (the Opposition swept the senatorial contest) the reason was that the warlords were largely frustrated by Namfrel, by the ROTC boys and, most of all, by the secretary of national defense. Ramón Magsaysay, who had vowed to keep the polls clean, did try to, though the marines he sent to Negros Occidental, for instance, were helpless against the reign of terror imposed by Governor Lacson and his "special police" and "civilian guards." Lacson's private army ensured his victory — and also his downfall.

The Saturday after the polls, at around two in the afternoon, Ninoy was at the Times office when Secretary Magsaysay rang up. "Can you be at the airport at three o'clock?" he asked Ninoy. "We are leaving for Bacolod." Ninoy asked what was going on there. "A big story has broken," said the secretary, "the Moises Padilla case." Ninoy ran to tell Times publisher Joaquin Roces, who was very interested, having already been contacted for help by a woman who
claimed that her son Moisés had been snatched by the Lacson goons. Because no photographer could be found, Mr. Rocos picked up his own Lein-lhof Tencina and rushed with Ninoy to the airport. Waiting with Secretary Magsaysay were his aide, José Estrella; his vice-chief of staff, Jesús Vargas; and Mr. Oscar Arellano (who would later organize Operation Brotherhood). During the flight to Bacolod the secretary briefed Ninoy and Mr. Rocos on the background of the story.

Four or five months before the elections, a young man named Moisés Padilla had approached the secretary and introduced himself as a former guerrilla leader of Negros Occidental. The young man said he wanted to go back to Negros and run for mayor of Magallón town, to break Governor Lacson's hold on the province. But such was the terrorism then, said Moisés Padilla, that it might be unhealthy for him to run against a Lacson candidate, unless the secretary could enforce order in the province during the elections. “Okay, I'll give you protection,” said Magsaysay to the young man. Moisés Padilla returned to Negros, ran for mayor of Magallón, and lost. Two days after the polls he was picked up on a charge of sedition and taken away by Lacson's special police and civilian guards. The report had just arrived that he was dead—had died on the morning of that day, November 17, when Magsaysay, as soon as he got the report, called up Ninoy and took him along to Bacolod.

They landed at around half-past five in the afternoon, were met by marines and a PC task force and, with this escort, drove down to Magallón town. They arrived there late in the evening and found Magallón a ghost town. The houses stood dark and empty; everyone had fled. Dogs were howling in the night. After the marines had secured the town Magsaysay and his party proceeded to the one house where lights showed. They climbed a stairway to a room where four candles burned around a table. On the table lay the corpse of a big man, naked to the waist, the torso dotted with dark wounds where the splash of blood had crusted. A number of persons were clustered round a weeping old woman. When Magsaysay approached she flung her arms around his knees and wailed: “My son is dead! My son is dead!”

As Ninoy took notes and Mr. Rocos shot pictures, Magsaysay examined the body of Moisés Padilla. It was obvious that he had been mauled brutally before he was shot dead. At first his family was afraid to talk. Said their guest: “I am Secretary Magsaysay and I came all the way from Manila to right a wrong done on your people.” But one girl cried: “Sir, we may be safe now, but what will happen to us when you leave?” And she whispered in his ear: “The special police may retaliate on us again!” Promised Magsaysay:

“The marines and additional troops will remain in your town as long as you need them.” Finally he won their confidence and they were presently kissing his hands and tugging at his jacket, anxious to tell him about the terror that had their province in its grip. But of the death of Moisés Padilla all they knew was that, 24 hours after he was taken away with seven of his political leaders, his bullet-riddled body had been dumped back in Magallón. They were told he had been shot while trying to escape. The autopsy would reveal he had been shot in the back, at close range, while in a reclining position; ten bullets had penetrated his body. The corpse was meant to be a warning to all those who would defy the warlord's power.

Recalls Ninoy:

“During the flight back to Manila, Oscar Arellano said to Magsaysay: ‘Mr. Secretary, you now realize that democracy in the Philippines is dying. You are its only savior.’ That was the beginning of the line: Our democracy will die, kung wala si Magsaysay. But Magsaysay refused to listen. He said: ‘Let's not talk about that. Quirino will be furious if he hears of it.' But we were discussing the implications. In fact, it was suggested that if Quirino didn't lift a finger against Rafael Lacson, Magsaysay should resign as defense secretary. Anyway, I wrote what I thought was a very factual account of the Moisés Padilla killing. I don't know if I was carried away by emotion; from the moment we came back from Bacolod at around noon, I was writing furiously. I don't know how many reams I turned out on the story.”

The Ninoy scoop created a sensation. Overnight Moisés Padilla became a cause célèbre, his mangled body an image of the Republic. And overnight Magsaysay became a hero, revealed by the speed and drama with which he acted on the case, as in the mass airlift of troops to the Lacson police state. He had already begun to be a name because of his successes against the Huk, his capture of the Manila politiburo, but it was the Moisés Padilla case that turned him into a national figure as it was the press coverage he got then that enunciated the now legendary charisma. The curious fact is that alarm was his reaction to sudden fame. When the Ninoy scoop appeared and was followed by pandemonium in the press, the defense secretary was dismayed.

“He was so alarmed by my story,” recalls Ninoy, “that he wanted me to go to Quirino and deny my own story. He said it had made him a hero at the expense of the President and the President had called him down. So he was pleading with me to deny the story. He said: ‘Ninoy, you got me in bad shape with my President. I should be grateful to you for making me such a hero, but the President
diedn't take kindly to that." It seems that Quirino had said to him: "What are you trying to do to me? You are my defense secretary!"

Magsaysay would later realize what a break the Moisés Padilla case had been for him; and when he ran for President in 1953, he stumped chiefly on the melodrama of that night when "I held in my arms the bleeding symbol of democracy: the body of Moisés Padilla." But as late as mid-1952, when the Magsaysay-for-President Movement began and Dindo Gonzales was asking Ninoy, as the reporter who best knew Magsaysay, to do a profile on the Guy as a potential President, Ninoy still could not see him as presidential timber. "I told Dindo: 'Impossible — how could he become President?' I didn't know then that a fantastic build-up of Magsaysay was already going on: articles in Collier's Magazine and the Reader's Digest and that Man on a White Horse article." The Americans had realized that still another "dependency" might go the way of Korea unless Quirino was toppled. The beauty of it is that, if in Korea they enlisted the United Nations in their sly crusade, in the Philippines they were to enlist the entire radio-lib establishment no less, from Laurel and Recto down, in the one successful crusade of the era to save the imperial chestnuts. These didn’t, thanks to Magsaysay, a good fetcher, get burned in the fire next time.

The year 1952 was, however, not primarily a time for politics for Ninoy but rather the year he went into the movies and into an Asia for the Asians. The movie he did was to have been called Tenth BCT In Korea but came out with the stark title Korea; and it’s chiefly remembered now as the movie in which Nilda Blanca was discovered.

Soon after he returned from Korea, Ninoy had been asked by LVN Studios to do a script for a movie on the Philippine battalion in Korea. The owner of LVN was Doña Sisang de León, whom Ninoy had known since he was a little boy because the de Leóns were neighbors of the Aquinos in New Manila. "So I was asked to draw up a story line, which I did. Then I sat down with their editors. Then I sat down with Bert Avellana, who was going to direct. He went over the script, had a story conference, began to recruit the cast." The leading roles were given to Jaime de la Rosa, LVN’s top star, and Gil de León. Though there was a war correspondent in the story, Ninoy did not play himself. The story also had a minor role for an actress, which took some time to fill. "At that time there was a young extra running around the LVN lot by the name of Dorothy Jones. Because she was very fair, she would be renamed Nida Blanca. I think,” says Ninoy, “it was Doña Sisang’s daughter, Amanda Eraña, who discovered Nida and forced her on Bert. She had a brief role as a Korean girl and she would win a Famas award for it, her first attempt. So would Gil de León as supporting actor. And as money-maker the movie would come very close to Roberta, then the box-office champion." Ninoy thoroughly enjoyed his movie adventure, which earned him P2500. "It was interesting for a young man to be in that world of drama, among the glamorous people. In those days the extras were prettier than the stars; the stars had airs, so we concentrated on the extras. I learned a lot working with Bert Avellana. He’s a perfectionist, a consummate artist. We would later do documentaries together."

Bert Avellana recalls that the idea of a movie on Korea sprang from a radio dramatization of a Ninoy communiqué on a ravaged nunnery in Korea and the little orphan girl he befriended there. On reading that report Bert and his wife Daisy had thought it good material for their weekly radio show Mummies of the Air (which would later become Stage of the World).

"This was on DZFM and DZRH," says Bert, "where a group of people — León María Guerrero, Raúl Manglapus; oh, a whole batch of young people — were putting on news events in dramatized form gratis. We were not paid and we didn’t charge the studio either. After we had put on the Ninoy item I told Manny de León, who was helping us pick out stories, that Ninoy might have material for a movie on Korea. ‘Let’s talk to him,’ said Manny. I hadn’t met Ninoy yet but he was a good friend of Manny de León and in some way closely related to Doña Sisang because he called her Lola. So we called him in and he came in fatigue, the war correspondent’s uniform, and I found him a very young man of tremendous vitality, certainly most articulate. It was decided that Ninoy was to write a scenario; that’s the first step, not a script."

The scenario that Ninoy came up with was a straight news report, carefully documented, but he had indicated which portions had possibilities for drama. The material excited Bert Avellana.

"Ninoy had put in the story of Captain Yap and Lieutenant Arriaga, who were killed in action, and of Lieutenant Bonny Serrano, who was a one-man army, and of a Korean girl who seems to have fallen in love with the Filipino war correspondent. The real hero was Bonny Serrano, a very colorful man; so we brought him in, too, to advise us on the movie. And every afternoon Ninoy would come to the studio and hover over the script being written from his scenario. He had full say on what to include and what to delete. And we came up with a mighty good script, a script that even in those days of stringent standards (I think nowadays they don’t use a script anymore) was well-knit and well-done. So, one could not help but make a good movie out of it. The script was a collaboration between us and Ninoy himself."
Bert Avellana has his own version of how Nida Blanca came into Korea:

"In a movie of mine called In Despair there was a scene where six girls had to carry a small birthday cake to the celebrant, Mila del Sol, then a big star, and one of the cake-carriers I picked was this girl, Dorothy Jones. When we were casting Korea we needed a pret-looking girl and I thought that maybe Miss Dorothy Jones could do it. So we dressed her up as a Korean girl and she became Liu-Ming. Sounded Chinese to me, not Korean. And Gil de León was Captain Yap, Jaime de la Rosa was Bonny Serrano, and Johnny Reyes was Ninoy Aquino. The movie was acclaimed when shown and it made money for LVN. It wasn't only for the intellectuals."

The movie was shot in about two months, during the summer of 1952, on a stretch of Marikina boondocks, which, says Bert, Ninoy himself had discovered.

"Ninoy was some kind of technical adviser and he insisted on authenticity. He picked the location for us: back of Boys Town in Marikina, because he said it was the site that most closely approximated the scene of the story. The site is now called Mari-Korea, but I don't know if it was called that because the film was shot there.

Ninoy came every day to check on details: uniforms, the kind of artillery we used, everything. He wanted it big; he didn't want a piddling, a teardrop; he demanded an ocean of action — and that's what he got. He's a lover of spectacle, and Korea was a spectacle.

"Expense was of no account. He would confer with Manny de León and Manny would check out a few things with him. He was there every afternoon. And he knew everybody, he spoke our language. He knew the technicians; he was friend to most of the movie stars; and he was quite a favorite of the young girls. Handsome young fellow, cousin of Manny de León, and with pretty much the run of the studio. Maybe it was a crucial point in his life and he was trying to decide whether he would become a movie producer — or President?"

It was certainly the crucial point in Nida Blanca's career; the movie made her and for the next dozen years or so she shared superstardom only with Gloria Romero, the other movie queen of the period. Nida Blanca has her own version of how she got into Korea — and Ninoy is the factor.

"The girl they originally got for the role was a star, Lila Luna, but she decided to get married and quit the movies for good. So I," says Nida Blanca, "was second choice. I think it was Ninoy who picked me. He's a friend of Bert Avellana, who was already crying me as a substitute for that particular role. But I was Ninoy's first choice, because my chinky eyes made me resemble this Korean girl, Liu-Ming, the part I played. I got to know Ninoy only during the shooting. I was surprised when I first met him: he was so young, practically my age, only a year or two older. I felt so grateful I became his fan, we became friends. On the truck, on our way to location, we'd sit together and he'd tell me stories about the war in Korea, because I kept asking. I had become very inquisitive because I knew he was doing the script, and I was ambitious. And he would tell me about his war adventures and about Bonny Serrano. During the shooting, it was really as if we were in a war: explosions in the mountains and fighting in the woods, and they were all in uniform, even Ninoy was always in fatigue, and I was the only girl there. At lunch break we fell in line for the chow, just like in the army, and Ninoy was very gentlemanly, always offering to serve me, and we'd eat together."

The other technical adviser, Bonny Serrano, could only look on wistfully but made his sighs audible to Nida.

"He had developed a crush on me but at first he kept his distance because he thought Ninoy was in love with me, seeing how Ninoy and I were always together and the same age. Bonny was much older. But later he must have understood that Ninoy and I were just friends and then he began to make love to me. It was really very funny."

In the movie Nida played a war wife hanging around the Filipinos' camp and finding a protector in Bonny Serrano, with whom she falls in love. They are separated for a while and when she returns, the Filipinos have pulled up camp and are moving away. The Chinese have mounted their offensive. The girl runs after the departing trucks, shouting Bun, Bun, though bombs are bursting all around. Finally she sees Bonny in one of the trucks; he tries to wave her away but it's too late: the pursuing girl gets shot but keeps on running, is hit again and again but is still crying Bun, Bun, and chasing after the convoy when Avellana shouts Cut!

"It was a nice scene," says Nida. "I never had a chance to play a part like that again." She was to make her box-office fame in comedy. "When Famas celebrated its twentieth anniversary Romy Galang was the emcee and when it was my turn to speak I said I couldn't hide my age because Romy and many others present were already members of Famas the year I won its first award for best supporting actress. I never won another award: no chance; all my other roles were comedy. But I didn't feel bad about it because here I was, still playing comedy when many of my contemporaries had faded away." Twenty years before, when she did Korea, she was still in high school. "I was graduating from fourth year and when I said I couldn't show up for shooting one afternoon because I had been
chosen Miss High School and had to ride in a parade and attend a big velada, Avellana and the rest of the crew said I was acting like a big star already and that they wouldn't talk to me again. But they were only having their fun, trying to scare me, this group that worked with me on Korea and that we called Marka Bungo. And at my graduation, as they had all the time been planning to do, they were all there to applaud me — except Ninoy. Ninoy didn't come.

"It was really only a sideline," says Ninoy of his cinema stint, "only one aspect of my journalistic career. I never appeared in the movie. The P2500 they gave me for my story was big money in those days, and I was self-supporting; but I was completely engrossed in my journalistic work. I hardly ever went home. I'd drop in there early in the morning so I could see Mother before she went to early mass. But we had little contact. I was at the office from five in the afternoon until midnight, when the paper was put to bed. Then we stood by for a remat in case a story broke. At two o'clock I'd be sleeping in my chair. Up at half-past six, into a cold shower, into my car, and off to the UP."

As soon as school closed that year, 1952, he went on another overseas assignment for the Times: a three-month roving commission tour of Southeast Asia, to report on the wars in the area and how its leaders felt about a possible "Pacific Pact" against Communism. Ninoy was footloose again. "The idea of the pact was broached by Quirino and it would later produce the Seato, in 1954; but I was the one who blazed the trail for it, sounding out the leaders of Southeast Asia, in 1952. This was purely a journalist's venture. The intent of the proposed pact was to set up a collective defense organization of the so-called 'Free World' countries, with Chiang Kai-shek as the anchor of the alliance." Since Quirino was supposed to be behind the proposal and he was, by the summer of 1952, clearly on his way out, Ninoy rather felt that he was doing an assignment for a "lame duck" President. But the adventurer in him relished this chance to see more of the world and its wars. The tour was chiefly from one embattled scenery to another. In April he went to Taiwan, Hong Kong and Thailand; in May he traveled Vietnam and Burma; in June he was in Malaya, Singapore and Indonesia.

"I would stay about a week in each country, would read up on it before arriving, then line up my interviews. The format of the articles on each country was: first, a brief history of the country; then the data on it, a bit of travelogue; then the leadership structure, who the leaders were, what their problems were, plus a forecast; then a report on what the feeling was about a Pacific pact. In those days there were no tape-recorders, had to take down notes, and every night I'd be working like mad until two o'clock organizing my notes and writing my reports. Before jumping off to another country, I'd shut myself in for a day and night to complete my series, then rush to the nearest airline office and send the stuff to Manila. Dave Boguslav would assign it to the rewrite people, who had some job trying to decipher what I had written. At any rate, I was always on schedule. I was sending back my reports seven at a time and they were coming out regularly, giving prominence in the Times. I was among the very first in Philippine journalism to attempt something like that: firsthand foreign reports. Our papers then relied heavily on wire services and international agencies. They never sent out reporters."

His roving commission reports now read like chapters in the further education of the young Ninoy Aquino (he was then pushing twenty) and like a movement towards the "Asia-for-the-Asians" idea that was to become a cry in the mid-'50s. When he set out on his Asian tour, he was equipped with the domino theory that Westerners in Asia had made so fashionable and so terrifying; and he could say of Vietnam that "should this state fall into the hands of the Communists the Free World might as well write off Southeast Asia as LOST." But by the end of his tour he had found out that Communism was not uniformly a bogey to Asians, quite a number of whom equated it with liberation; and that the region in general was cool to the idea of an Asian pact against the Communists. What had he discovered was an Asia that feared not the Reds but the West, an Asia that wanted no involvement in the East-West cold war nor in the crusades of the "Free World," and that therefore abhorred the proposed Pacific Pact as one more ploy to align it with the Americans in their battles against a rival power.

Said a wiser Ninoy at the end of his travels:

"To the Asian, the western argument that 'if Communism wins, Asians stand to lose their civil liberties' is meaningless. To the Asian now jailed by the French in the numerous prisons of Vietnam for being 'too nationalistic,' civil liberties have no meaning. To the Asian jailed on St. John's Island in Singapore for possessing intelligence and nationalist spirit above the average, civil liberties are likewise meaningless. The Filipino is aware of and has enjoyed America's benevolence; but to the rest of Asia, the American looks like the Frenchman, the Britisher and the Dutchman. To Asians, these people are the symbols of oppression. And many Asians would prefer Communism to western oppression."

The tragedy was not that the dominoes (those tools and toys of the West) might fall but that they wanted to fall.

In Taiwan, Ninoy interviewed the Generalissimo, who assured him that "the internal problems of Asia can never be solved until
the root causes — the Kremlin and Peking — are crushed." And to that end — the crushing of the Communist peoples — Chiang Kai-shek was only too willing to place his forces under a unified Pacific command. One general told Ninoy that his army was "ready to launch the initial beachhead" in the retaking of the mainland. But Ninoy noticed that "shades of old corruption" that had lost Chiang the mainland were still evident in Nationalist China, "although on a much smaller scale"; and that Taiwan was "no place for scholars or politicians" because "the military caste is still holding the reins." The army even had a department to check on the "current thinking" in the various commands — a department that, as Ninoy wickedly observed, has "some semblance to communist organs under different names."

While in Hong Kong, Ninoy learned the answer to a giggled riddle: "How does Chairman Mao keep his sugar sweet?" The United States had banned trade with Mao's China, to starve it to submission, and the United Nations had obediently imposed its own embargo; but Mao's sugar stayed sweet — and Ninoy saw why. Freighters from all over the world sailed into Hong Kong harbor and, even before docking, were unloaded outside the breakwater, their cargoes carried off by mysterious little sampans. Hong Kong was obviously Mao's grocery and, despite the American and UN embargo, continued to provide, as the Hong Kong folk giggled, sweetness to the Chairman's sugar. "Over teacups in Hong Kong shops," observed Ninoy, "people don't criticize the evils of Communism as they would in the tea shops of Taipei, the Escolta, or New York. On the other hand, neither are they vocal in damning American imperialists. People here talk in whispers when they have something important to say. They laugh and giggle loudest when there is really nothing funny. But there was something funny going on. In Hong Kong, as everybody knew, the "Free World" was practising civil disobedience, thumping its nose at Uncle Sam behind his back.

The Thai leaders were blunt on the proposed Pacific pact: it would only mean "going back to colonial days." But the Thai, reported Ninoy, were passing from one colonialism to another. British and French influence had waned; coca-colonization had set in. Three years before, there had been only three Cadillacs in Bangkok and no Chesterfields or Lucky Strikes, no Arrow or Van Heusen shirts, and no Coca-Cola signboards in the streets. "Today the picture is different. There are as many — in fact, more — American cars than British or French. American cigarettes are flooding the market. American aid is pouring in fast and with it American technicians. The stores of Bangkok today are mute testimonies to the declining British influence in Asia. Among the spectators on the sidelines are the stooges of Uncle Joe, avidly watching Thailand in transition. Enter Uncle Sam, exit the Union Jack."

Vietnam, of course, applauded the idea of a Pacific pact — or, rather, the French in Vietnam and their native stooges did. Ninoy was told by a Vietnamese, "who was not afraid to be picked up by the French security police and lodged in jail," that he hated the French because they pretended to be saving the Vietnamese people from Communism but really intended to "keep them in bondage as colonial slaves." An "independent state within the French union," Vietnam had no constitution, no legislature, no budget and no national officials, for the native leaders of government were all still French citizens. The country had not yet been divided into North and South, but the capital of the state, Hanoi, was already in peril from the forces of Ho Chi Minh, who claimed to head the true Republic of Vietnam. The war had been on for six years. Ninoy interviewed the Viet premier, Tran Van Huu, and the premier decried the reluctance of other nations to recognize his government on the ground that it was puppet. France, said the premier, was merely "helping us to free ourselves from the past" and scrupulously abstained from "interfering in our own affairs." Wrote Ninoy, tongue in cheek: "On paper, Vietnam is actually free; and Premier Huu only repeated what was already written on paper. At the interview there could have been two personalities: Premier Huu, the official; and Mr. Huu, the nationalist. The nationalist Huu did not reveal himself."

Ninoy flew to the front in Bach-Ninh and saw the French Union Forces, mostly Foreign Legionnaires, recapture, in a dawn operation involving ground troops, artillery barrage and air cover, three miserable little villages from the Viet Minh. "The saddest sight here in this theater of operations is the thousands of refugees carrying bundles of their last belongings on their backs, going somewhere, anywhere they can find a roof to shelter them, but nowhere in particular." The French "victory" had razed their villages. "I saw children clinging to their elder sisters, barefooted, crying and hungry. I saw mothers in the drab brown-and-black costume of Vietnamese women sitting alongside the gravel roads and looking helplessly at the convoys whizzing past. Dust covered their faces and then a slight drizzle turned the dust into a clayish mask. The refugees simply wiped their faces and marched on to an unknown destination." In gay Hanoi, where commerce was chiefly carnal, the Foreign Legionnaires — bereted Germans and Italians, turbanned Moroccans — cursed the long war as they sat under the umbrellas of the sidewalk cafés, and did the mambo to the music of the only dance band in town: the eight-piece Filipino orchestra of Ely Javier. This was a war, observed Ninoy, where, whichever side they were on, it was
the Vietnamese who lost: "There is one universal feeling throughout Vietnam: hatred of the French colonizer."

In Burma, Ninoy saw no hope for a Pacific pact. Though it had its own Red rebellion, the socialist state of Premier U Nu maintained relations with Peking and adhered to a policy of strict neutrality. How could it join a crusade against the Communists when one of its top leaders was openly declaring that "Marxism is the guide to action in our revolutionary movement, in our establishment of a Socialist Burmese State for workers and peasants?" Reported Ninoy: "Burma wants to be left alone. Burmese officials say (every time they have a chance) that Burma's policy is friendship with every one. She is like a young girl to whom every suitor is welcome, though marriage or any such commitment is strictly taboo."

Malaya was another "independent state" within an empire (the British) where the supposed native rulers (the sultans) were actually puppets. Ninoy heard the nationalist leader Dato Onn Bin Jaafar compare his country to a house where "the living room, dining room, master's bedroom and tiled bathroom are occupied by our British partners, while the Malay owner occupies the kitchen and garage and is usually the cook and driver of the British guest." The war of liberation triggered by the Japanese was still being fought, though not by the passive Malay, and Ninoy saw the institution of the Briggs Plan (later to be used in Vietnam as the agro-ville system) where entire village populations were herded into concentration camps at night, so the guerrillas would have no one to get food from — the same system used by the Americans in the Philippines in the 1900s against the "second wind" of the Revolution.

In Malaya the guerrillas were mostly Chinese and Communist because, after the war, the anti-Jap movement had become, like the Huk, a war of liberation. Ninoy saw this war of guerrillas at close range. "In one of their sorties I joined the Suffolk, a British regiment, and we entered the Kula Langat area, some sixty kilometers south of Kuala Lumpur. I was with a sixty-man patrol that was to spring from the rubber plantations into the jungle. We jumped at around three in the morning. By seven the battle was raging, a terrific fire fight. Afterwards, among those killed we found the body of Lo Pin, brother of guerrilla supremo Ching Pin. This was a big catch and very big news in Malaya. I broke the story, I was the only correspondent there: headline stories all over Malaya and the world. This gave me an entrée into the government of Malaya. The elite were the royalty of the various states of the federation. Then there were the nationalist organizations, of which Jaafar was the leader among the Malayans. I found them very different from us, they were Moslems. So little movement, on the surface; and Kuala Lumpur was a sleepy town, no development. I never heard of Tunku Abdul Rahman in those days; this guy Jaafar was the leading nationalist. Nor did I hear of Lee Kuan Yew when I went to Singapore, just a small city then. Little did I suspect it would become a republic. So you can imagine the change in leadership in a brief ten years."

Finally, Ninoy went to Sukarno's Indonesia and was told: "Our people are not ready for any defense alliance." Said Hadji Agar Salim, an elder statesman: "If the western powers want to preserve their way of life they must be willing to pay the price; but Asians must never allow themselves to become cannon fodder for the West. The United States is tolerating western colonial ambitions, thus putting her motives under suspicion as far as the bulk of Asia is concerned. How can you envision an alliance with Australia when Australia bans non-Caucasians from her shores?" In Jakarta, Ninoy most clearly heard the doctrines of post-colonial Asia: the insistence on independent nationalist policies in government, a neutral position in the feuds of the great powers, concentration on local problems, and the making of an Asia at last for the Asians. Of the leaders he had met, Ninoy would say that the two who most impressed him were: Sihanouk of Cambodia, who quit as king to become head of state; and Sukarno of Indonesia, who was plagued by myriad problems and yet rejected American aid. The two dramatized the breaking of ancient bonds.

Back in Manila, Ninoy did a résumé of Asia's reactions to the new call to a crusade against the enemies of the "Free World." Asia, said Ninoy, was not responding: "The proposal of President Quirino for a Pacific Defense Alliance has been met coldly by Southeast Asian leaders. Burma, India and Indonesia have come out with unequivocal statements that they are not interested." The Philippines was being sneered at for issuing the call to Asia when it had been keeping itself so aloof from Asia, maintaining embassies in the West and even in "lily-white" Australia while disdaining to open even consulates in Asia. "An Asian leader, after visiting the Philippines, went back to his people disillusioned. In tears he told them: 'Instead of finding light in the Philippines, I found Western darkness.' Most of Asia did not share the Philippine horror of Communism. "As an offshoot of their fight against imperialism, many youthful nationalist leaders in Asia sought the guidance of Marx, the arch-enemy of imperialism. When their countries gained statehood they found it beneficial to continue most of Marx's philosophies." Both the Jap and the Soviet imperialists were regarded as emancipators of Asia. "Without Japan's ill-fated military adventure, Asian leaders believe that the western powers — England, France and the Netherlands — would still be in Asia as masters. The cold war began shortly after the world war. And Russia emerged as the new threat, the indirect
liberator of Asia.” How then could the old discredited leaders of the “Free World” summon Asia to a crusade against its own liberation? “Throughout Southeast Asia there is a growing tendency to keep away from the East-West struggle. Asian leaders call it the ‘Asian philosophy’ and in brief it means ‘non-involvement’ in the present struggle as ‘not Asia’s making or concern.’ ” Even America was losing “what little influence she has over most of Asia” because American policies were “double-faced” and “insincere.” The America now rallying Asia to its side was the same America that armed France, whose soldiers were killing Asians; and pacted with Australia, whose government dreaded Asian contact; and aided Britain, whose proconsuls were duping the sultans of Malaya and jailing or slaying Malayan nationalists. Concluded Ninoy: “Insecure and suspicious Asia is keeping open the ‘doors of negotiation’ with the opposite camp.”

The Ninoy Aquino who came to these conclusions was obviously not quite the eager beaver who had set out firm in the fear that if the Viet domino should fall all Asia would be LOST. The qualms resisted in Korea had quickened to skepticism, but where doubt had brought anguish before, it bred shrewdness now. “I had gone out as roving reporter, more concerned with day-to-day news than with in-depth reporting. What can you do in one or two weeks per country?” Asia, it turned out, was larger than the issue which seemed so ominous then when it was merely topical; and the “one or two weeks per country” had been primer enough on the complexities of the hemisphere, so that in the end the reporting did become a cautionary travelogue. He had seen the bare breasts dancing in Bali and the Thai feet boxing in Bangkok; the sultans of Malaya had dazzled him with their folly and he had gone stumping in Hong Kong among the Aberdeen houseboats and fish stench; in Vietnam he had sampled both the muck of war on the countryside and the Parisian style of Hanoi and Saigon; guerrilla hills and their dangers were pointed out to him on the Burma Road and on the road to Mandalay; and in Formosa he had watched the Gimo gesture to the mainland and say, “It won’t be long now.” The Ninoy who stored up these images had looked on Asia in counterpart: the Asia that was being saved by the West (like poor bloody Vietnam) and the Asia that would save itself from the West (like poor bloody Malaya); and from the experience he had gained the ironic note: “To the Asian, democracy and oppression are synonymous. Democracy in Asia is almost on the 13th step of the gallows.” Despite his demur that a crusade was not exactly what Asia needed or wanted, the righteous would go ahead and form their Pacific alliance, which they would call Seato and the rest of Asia would dub the Paper Tiger — a scheme so inept that the Americans had, after all, to plunge into Vietnam.

Through the rest of 1952, Ninoy was involved in the plot to steal Magsaysay from Quirino and make him run for President.

“Dindo Gonzales had already succeeded in making Recto, Tañada, Laurel and Peláez come to a secret agreement to make Magsaysay their common candidate. I was a reporter but I had been inveigled into joining this movement. I was in the think tank and we were thinking up reasons to jump. We had to find a casus belli because Magsaysay didn’t want to junk Quirino just like that. In fact, I recall distinctly that we were once summoned to Poro Point and Quirino asked Magsaysay point blank: ‘Is it true you are running for President?’ And Magsaysay said: ‘I’ll never abandon you.’ Or something like that. And Quirino confronted me and the two other reporters who were with Magsaysay — Celso Cabrera and Primitivo Millán — but we were able to allay his fears. So Quirino took Magsaysay to Isabela and presented him there as ‘my son, my right-hand man, my heir apparent.’ But early in 1953, maybe around February, Quirino said: ‘This guy Magsaysay can never be President. He’s only a mechanic, amateurish. He is only good for killing.’ And they came up with scurrilous reports on his grades at the UP, where he had flunked out. That was the trigger. The break had come.”

The Guy campaigned to the beat of the mambo, orchestrated by the American boys, and Quirino’s fall was Foggy Bottom’s rebound. Despite all the talk of lost prestige, the Yanqui had proved they could still be king-makers in Asia. Ninoy inaugurated the Magsaysay era with an enterprise that would crown the process of his growing up, in the year when he turned 22.
The Guy and the Supremo

DURING the first month of Magsaysay — January 1954 — his "rah-rah boys" were duly allotted seats in the kingdom; but Ninoy, when asked where he wanted to go, replied that he was staying in journalism. The euphoria of the campaign was cooling, at least within the political alliance, especially in the Recto camp, which had started to suspect that what was hailed as a triumph of democracy was chiefly American innings. The fear that they had been used in a coup to install an American Boy spurred Recto and company into flushing out the new President's ideology. The neo-Propaganda of the nationalists had begun.

Because they were deployed against a leader he believed in, Ninoy found himself on the other side of the fence from ideas he had discovered and reported with sympathy during his Asian tour.

"As diplomatic reporter, I was called in by Magsaysay early that January. Recto was already sniping. As a concession to Don Claro, León Marfa Guerrero had been appointed undersecretary of foreign affairs, and they were talking of an 'Asia for the Asians.' This did not sit well with Magsaysay. So he asked me to prepare a position paper. I commissioned Johnny Arreglado to do the paper; I rewrote it, then gave it to Magsaysay. On that paper was based his classic fight with Recto — the debate over the Formosa Strait question, the presence of the U.S. Seventh Fleet, and Vietnam recognition. We were supplying the foreign office with background material. By the end of January, I could observe a strain in the relations between Magsaysay and Recto. Don Claro had definitely positioned himself against the All-American Boy."

Ninoy saw that the controversy could erode public enthusiasm for the Guy unless his administration came up at once with a stunning feat. "So, in one of our meetings that January, I said to him: 'Mr. President, we have to do something dramatic, maybe on the Huk front. After the big
build-up of the campaign there cannot be a let-down; we have to sustain the momentum." He asked me what I had in mind and told him I had this wild idea of trying to contact Taruc. He thought it a good idea.

At that time there was a lull in the Huk wars and no news at all of the Huk supremo. Some said he had died of illness, or had been killed in the field; others, that he had escaped to China by submarine. Ninoy started his sleuthing in Concepcion town. The Huk mayor there during the Liberation (when Ninoy was playing Constantino to Huk amazons) was Gorgonio Narciso; he had been deposed by the military and thrown into prison but was later released. Ninoy tracked him down and persuaded him to help in locating Taruc.

Gorgonio Narciso was a friend of Taruc's half-brother Meliton, a tailor who was the "white sheep" in the Taruc family: he had refused to join his brothers in the hills. Meliton was brought to Ninoy, who easily convinced him to join the search because, as Meliton said, he himself had never given up hope that his brother would return to the peaceful life. Meliton's tailoring shop had flourished while it had contracts to do ROTC uniforms but it had lost those contracts when certain ROTC officials decided it was outrageous to be wearing uniforms tailored by a brother of the Huk supremo.

Through Meliton, Ninoy contacted Juan Calma, a Huk graduate of Camp Crame, but the terrified Calma stubbornly refused to be "dragged into further trouble." Ninoy had to run to Magsaysay and get a presidential guarantee that Juan Calma's participation in the search for Taruc would not aggravate his footing with the military. Calma then brought in another operative: Teotico Ortiz, "whose faith in Divine Providence," Ninoy was to say, "sustained him in the hazardous task of crossing government lines to keep the communication lanes between this reporter and Taruc open."

The four contact men he had lined up — Gorgonio Narciso, Meliton Taruc, Juan Calma and Teotico Ortiz — put Ninoy on the trail of a fourth: Arsenio Taruc, an uncle of the supremo. Ninoy found Arsenio Taruc at the Divisoria Market, a bent old man hawling stinking baskets of fish. Once a well-to-do councilor of San Luis town in Pampanga, Arsenio, because of the stigma on the family name, had sunk to poverty in his old age, had to flee Pampanga and hide in Manila, where he worked as market helper and stevedore.

Ninoy now had five men to form the nucleus of his search party. "The idea was to contact Taruc through any of them, and they were all racing each other." The winner seems to have been old man Arsenio, who first got wind of the quarry, though it was Juan Calma who proved to be the most intrepid contact man. Towards mid-February, Ninoy got a message from Taruc. "He said he was willing to grant me an interview but stipulated that Manuel Manahan, then head of the Presidential Complaints and Action Committee (PCAC), was to be with me." Manahan had scored a scoop as newsmen when he interviewed Taruc in 1950; Ninoy was at first aiming at nothing bigger than another scoop on Taruc.

"So I rushed to Magsaysay and told him about this big break and Magsaysay said to go ahead and talk to Manahan." Manny Manahan agreed to accompany Ninoy to the interview and on Valentine's Day, 1954, arrangements were completed for the meeting between the Huk supremo and the Guy's envoys. The following morning, February 15, Ninoy and Manahan, accompanied by Moises Escueta, who drove the jeep (he later became a congressman for Quezon province), and photographer Dario Arellano, left for Angeles, where Huk couriers were waiting to guide them into the wilds beyond Clark Field.

This was no-man's-land and the party had to cross lines of army troopers patrolling the boundaries of the law or deployed strategically for emergency action. Across no-man's-land the bumpy road ended and the Ninoy group was told to alight from the jeep. They were now on Huk turf and would have to walk the rest of the way. After a rugged hike they came to an outpost, where a relay team of Huk couriers waited to take them to the conference site. More walking uphill along zigzag trails and shallow rushing brooks brought them to a peak that rose straight up, moated about by an abyss dark with jungle growth. The path twisting over the peak was a breath-taking climb; they crawled down the other side to a dry riverbed and limply stretched out on the white sand. The banks were defined by huge boulders and a froth of foliage rustling with wildlife. The sheer cliffs of the peak enclosed the riverbed on both sides like giant walls hung with vine.

It was dusk when they came to this canyon; the meeting was set for seven o'clock but the hour passed and Taruc had not appeared. Suddenly, out of nowhere, appeared young men in olive drab armed with Brownings and Garands; for a moment Ninoy thought that his derring-do had been spoiled by the army — but the youths in fatigue turned out to be the advance guard of the supremo. They had been there all the time, lurking behind tree and bush, watching from a distance the visitors sprawled on the white sand as they guarded the approaches to the site. Silently, to no audible command, they deployed along the banks. The full moon had risen and in its light Ninoy saw how tough and healthy these young Hucks were. A while later came a second team of the advance guard, to herald the arrival of the supremo.

Taruc was an hour late to the appointment; he had a two-hour walk from his headquarters deep in the forest. Eight husky young bodyguards formed his escort and they carried Brownings, Thompsons, automatic carbines and Garands; but Taruc himself was in no way
grim-looking. He had a gentle voice and greeted the folk from Manila with old-fashioned courtesy, offering his hand to the son of the man once deemed a mortal enemy by the Hiks. Ninoy noted that the supremo looked spry and robust, a far cry from rumors of him as addled by malaria or wasted by TB. And he was current on events; he said he kept himself informed by portable radio.

The supremo refused to discuss the possibility of peace negotiations between him and the government (represented there by Manahan) but expressed “unequivocal loyalty” to the Republic and a willingness to cooperate with President Magsaysay. “I am a Filipino first and last,” he said. If he had not endorsed the Guy’s candidacy during the campaign, it was because he had suspected Magsaysay of being “dangerously inclined to the American imperialists.” But the people had spoken, had elected Magsaysay their President: “It is for us to accept their verdict.”

Besides, said Taruc, he believed that under Magsaysay the nation had been ushered into the right path, was on its way to “internal democratization, agrarian semi-revolution and modest industrialization.” One could only hope that the President would not deviate from this direction, since “the people are demanding virtual miracles.”

As for himself, said Taruc, he had not veered from the position that his was a just cause, a valid movement, nor from his demand that the country’s tenancy laws be revamped, to give the peasants a chance for a decent life. “I rose in rebellion because of social evils, especially those in Central Luzon, and I shall continue this movement to the last man even if only half of those evils are tolerated by the government,” he said.

The interview lasted three hours, until almost midnight, when the photographer snapped a last picture of the moonlit scene: Ninoy and Taruc and Manahan seated on the white sand in affable converse, the young Hiks standing about, leaning on their guns, and the high cliffs looming in light and shadow. Taruc and his men escorted the Ninoy party to the top of the mountain pass. A little way up the arduous ascent, Ninoy looked back at the canyon and saw no movement down there. The Hiks seemed to have melted into the moonlight.

Ninoy’s scoop was released by Manahan to all the Manila dailies and it stirred hopes for an end to Hik dissidence. “For the first time since 1950,” says Ninoy, “the fact had been established that Taruc was still alive. Up to then no one had been sure and many believed he was dead.”

Just as important was Ninoy’s report that Taruc felt sympathetic towards the new administration. “When we showed Magsaysay the pictures we had taken of Taruc, he was very excited. Where was he? Where was this? Tell me where you saw him,” he cried. He was planning a military raid. But Mandy Mahulitan said that would be a violation of confidence. After it had destined the meeting to Magsaysay, he said: “What do you think can we negotiate? And I said: ‘I don’t know if there’s room for negotiation—what do you say if I go back?’ He told me if it could follow up with.”

About three days after the scoop appeared, Ninoy was cautioned by his search group: the supremo wanted three hundred guns. Ninoy did not know it then, but Taruc had fallen out with the Communist in the Hik movement (especially the Camat brothers), and had been relieved as command-in-chief and put in prison. He had been hearing rumors that he would be transferred to the stockade and liquidated. Ninoy had unwittingly given him an idea of how to round up the “outlaws.”

The second meeting between Ninoy and Taruc was on February 18, on a grassy plain overlooking government troops. This time Ninoy was accompanied only by photographer. Dario, although another again they were guided from Angeles across the no-man’s-land of Clark Field and then from one relay outpost to another. Up the fringes of a mountain whose top jungle plateaus, the trees crowded, which plunged down to a lake: breaking round a slope of the mountain. The plateau was covered with bamboo groves and dense talahib grass taller than a man’s head. Ninoy said, “You know that our party?”

Ninoy calculated that the second rendezvous was a great distance from the first one. “The terrain was entirely foreign and more difficult to traverse: the hills were taller than in the first conference site, and the soil composition was clayish, making the descent very slippery. It was a long walk to the conference site with the hot afternoon sun beating down on us mercilessly. Overhead, the clouds gathered as we searched for traces of Taruc’s band. Farther away, on the lower plains were hundreds of government troops in blocking position while some three columns advanced from different directions.”

That very day, that very day, the battle was a memorable one: it was after the conference that they could not be separated by the area. The third interview was held before dusk fell from these taller hills it would be harder to crawl down in the dark. But this second interview, held in broad daylight under swaying bamboos, was less ambiguous than the first. Ninoy came away from it convinced that Taruc could be persuaded to come down. “The first cue to give me hope was Taruc’s talking about God. All along I had thought that Communists were atheists, but here
was this Huk talking about God. And Taruc explained to me that he was really a socialist, a follower of Pedro Abad Santos, and that he was never a card-carrying Communist. The second cue was his talking about nationalism, about his love for the Filipino. I thought to myself: ‘How can they call him an agent of Moscow when he is such a nationalist?’ Then he explained to me what he was in August: for the rebels, for the poor but you must know that your rebellion is costing the government a pretty penny. Why don’t you stop this war so the money spent on going after you may be used for something more productive, like irrigation, or hospitals for the poor?’ And he said: ‘What assurance do I have that Magsaysay will do all this?’ And I said: ‘Why, he’s a good guy, he won an overwhelming mandate from the people. Why don’t you give him a chance?’ He hinted to me that he might do that, and I carried this information to Magsaysay. But the military refused to buy the story. ‘Aw, you were talking to a wily guy and you’re so young.’ And the U.S. embassy guy came in, Ed Lansdale, to give us his own analysis: ‘These guys are commies, and we’ve got them on the run. Talk to Taruc now and he’ll do again what he did with Quirino — come down, collect his backpay, then take off again.’ In other words, the only good Huk is a dead Huk. But I argued that we should negotiate with them because they were Filipinos, in the wrong maybe, and maybe only misguided. That was going to be my line.

However, having learned how the army felt about negotiating with Taruc, Ninoy thought it wiser not to arrange a third interview. He knew he was being watched by the army, which was preparing to launch an offensive in Central Luzon. ‘I had told them that my meetings with Taruc were in southern Luzon but they didn’t believe that. Taruc was going to be harassed.’ During March, two letters from Taruc were sneaked in to Ninoy, who managed to sneak them back. ‘I told him I thought we should meet any more and should limit communication to our contacts but that the negotiations were still progressing. If I went to see him and his camp got bombed afterwards he might think I had double-crossed him.’

Toward mid-April, Ninoy was sent word that Taruc would wait for him on a certain day at the Candaba Swamps. With Moises Escueta again as his driver, Ninoy went to San Miguel de Mayumo late in the night and from there slipped to Candaba, having picked up a Huk guide along the way. It was six in the morning when they arrived at Barrio Pari, which is on the swamps. The guide took them to a hut in a watermelon field, where he left them to wait for Taruc. Presently they saw a line of figures on the horizon, apparently women wearing bandanas but obviously not women since they were carrying guns. Ninoy jumped up and down, waving his arms: “Here we are! Here we are!”

He thought it was the Taruc party. But when the some fifty men descended on the hut, Ninoy saw that they were soldiers. “They were the army in disguise. You should have seen my face. A sergeant stuck his carbine right at my throat and asked what I was doing there. I told him we were buying watermelons. It was a lame excuse. A young lieutenant by the name of César Maniclang saved my life. The moment he approached I pulled out my ID card, showed it to him, took him aside and told him: ‘I’m here on a special mission for President Magsaysay.’ He didn’t know what to do.” While the army hesitated, Ninoy and Escueta jumped into their jeep and sped away.

A furious Ninoy complained to Magsaysay. The fiasco was more dangerous than it appeared, for Ninoy’s guide to Candaba was a top-ranking Huk, Commander Victoria, and if he had fallen into army hands the Huk could well have assumed that Ninoy had set a trap. “I told Magsaysay that the army had bustled the negotiations. If Taruc and his men were already there when the army came, I would have been dead.”

He did not expect to hear again from Taruc and was surprised when, a week later, his contacts brought him a note from the supremo, who proposed another rendezvous: “the restaurant of Apung Gari in San Fernando.” Thus, one morning late in April, Ninoy drove to San Fernando and breakfasted in Apung Gari’s restaurant. A little boy approached him and said: “You have been followed, you are being watched. Go to the church of Minalin this afternoon. The meeting will be there.” Ninoy proceeded to Tarlac town in his white Buick convertible, a roadmaster he had equipped with an extra gasoline tank so he could carry as much as two hundred gallons.

In Tarlac, his back-up driver took the wheel, Ninoy sneaked off the car, which continued to Pangasinan. Ninoy hid out in a friend’s house, then used the friend’s car to go back to Pampanga. On still another car he made his way to Minalin, where, at the church, he was met by a courier. The supremo could not come. “We were waylaid,” explained the courier, “on our way here last night; we were on a banca. The cordon is too tight. The message I have for you is that you will receive a letter.”

The letter from Taruc arrived in May and in it the supremo defined the conditions on which he would be willing to come down
you have been blinded by this guy Taruc. He has converted you.

Meanwhile, Pampangan and Nueva Ecija were being sapped of their troops. The Guagua Tarlac, which was on Ninoy's farm, was attacked by the army. Ninoy, with his publisher and Mannan, who was also against the military, went to Nueva Ecija to meet the President and try to convince him to leave peacefully. Ninoy and the president met in the morning.

So I went to see Magaysay again. Mr. President, I told him, you have served your country, and you haven't had to spend a single centavo on us, while the army spends millions. All I ask is that in the matter of these negotiations, we keep faith with Taruc: no monkey business. Magaysay said: Ninoy.
I was going. I had warned the guide not to tell me until we were on the way. As we drove out of Camp Olivas he said to head towards Manila; then at the junction of the Aranay Road he told me to turn and we rode towards San Simón until we reached Barrio Tari.

The barrio was only a few kilometers from Camp Olivas. The army's chief quarry had holed up in the army's own backyard, just behind Camp Olivas, hidden and sheltered by the barrio folk.

It was half-past six when Ninoy got off the car, followed the narrow trail into the barrio and was met by a smiling Taruc. The supremeo was in gray shirt, brown gabardine pants, black-and-white basketball shoes, and rustic straw hat. Ninoy noted the change in him since their last meeting three months before; the intensified hunt for him had left Taruc pale and haggard. He said that only the day before, the army had raided the barrio and almost caught him. The barrio folk had hidden him among large baskets which the soldiers had started bayoneting; the women had saved him by covering him with their skirts. As he and Ninoy talked they were startled by sustained machine-gun firing not far from the barrio; troopers who had not got the freeze orders were flailing the bush for Huks.

At half-past seven Ninoy alerted Mr. Roces on the walkie-talkie that he and Taruc were coming out and should be at the highway junction in twenty minutes. In the white convertible Taruc sat between the driver and Ninoy. As they approached the junction they saw a convoy of cars almost blocking the road, guns sticking out of the car windows. "I told Taruc to lie down on the floor and the driver to skirt the convoy. They had their guns cocked at us but didn't know whether to shoot." Mr. Roces was waiting on the highway; the two cars raced to Manila.

According to arrangements with the Palace, Ninoy was to take Taruc straight to Magsaysay, who would be waiting on the presidential yacht, the Apo, on the bay. But when they reached Balintawak they were stopped by Colonel Valeriano, who told them that the orders had been changed: Taruc was to be taken to Camp Murphy. "Is the President there?" asked Ninoy. Valeriano said he didn't know, but had orders to see to it that Taruc was turned over to General Vargas. Ninoy was shocked.

To placate the army, which had lost the chance to nab Taruc, Magsaysay would break the agreement made with Taruc, by making it appear that the supreme was surrendering to the army. That moment when Taruc was wrested from his hands was one of the blackest in Ninoy's life. "It was the beginning of my differences with the army."

He wrote his scoop, then "cried my heart out." He refused to report to the President. "I didn't want to talk to him. This was a double-cross. He had violated all the terms of the agreement. He had agreed that the word surrender was not to be used but every goddam press release was using the word surrender. Only the Times headlined it as a 'return to the government.' Of course, by that time the other newspapers were sore—another scoop by the Times—and their editorials were shrill: Why should this bandit be given royal treatment, etc. Society was exacting its pound of flesh."

Once again Ninoy, graduating from an experience, fell into a melancholy. "I started brooding. I'd go home from the office and shut myself in and not come out of my room." Magsaysay sent word that he was giving Ninoy the Legion of Honor award, commander degree—a decoration nobler than that given Ninoy for his services in Korea and, in fact, the highest civilian award at that time. Ninoy said he was not interested. It did not add to his peace of mind that army agents had been detailed to guard him.

"Meanwhile, I kept one promise I had made to Taruc: that I would take care of his only son Romeo. The boy was living with a certain Rodriguez family in Grace Park and had stopped studying. I took him to the FEU; I think he was in second or third year high but he had no school records. I had to fix that up. He would finish high school, then go to medical school as an FEU scholar. I worked that out, with the help of Noring Reyes, then FEU executive vice-president. Romeo became a doctor in 1963. I had promised Taruc I would get his son back in school, and I kept that pledge."

Alarmed by her son's moodiness, Doña Aurora Aquino asked Mr. Roces to take her to the President. She told Magsaysay about her son's dejection: "He is feeling very aggrieved. He devoted four months to this mission and he has been disappointed." Magsaysay said he wanted to talk to Ninoy.

"So," says Ninoy, "he came to the house and said to me: 'Ninoy, you are still young, still idealistic. But you must remember that such are the problems of the Presidency that its actions may sometimes defy explanation. You have done a great service for the country, but you are looking at this matter only from your vantage point. I have my duties as President, I have to weigh so many viewpoints. Believe me, our intentions are the same and we can serve the country together. Give me a chance.' But I said to him: 'Why did you promise to receive Taruc on your yacht and then break your promise without telling me?' He said: 'Let's not talk about that. Just think, we have been together all these years. When we first met, you were a neophyte newsmen and I was defense secretary. Are we to break up now?' He was very solicitous and I must say he was able to placate me. After all, he was the President of the Philippines and I was just a reporter, only 21 years old, in fourth year law school."
The upshot was that Ninoy agreed to accept the Legion of Honor award. He was a bit disappointed because he thought he had done more for the country than the other guy.

Then one day, a friend of mine from Korea days came to me. "Ninoy," he said, "is a better rat than the rest. They are going to kill Taruc. Poison! I couldn't believe it, but he seemed to have the facts. The orders are already out."

He said, I went to Soccsakon and spoke to him. Mr. Roces was present. "I want this done in affidavit form," I told him, "so that if anything happens to me, I will know what to do." Magaysay, I said, "called. I went to see him with a gun. Packed in my belt."

"What would happen to my family, and myself if Taruc were killed?"

A lot of hot words were said. I told him that nothing had better happen to Taruc.

Ninoy felt so concerned, not only because Taruc had reposed confidence in him, a confidence that Ninoy could not afford to be betrayed, but also because, the more he thought about it, the more he felt that Taruc was a man worth saving.

"He was one of the few men who impressed me early in my life."

How many men have thought of doing, but didn't do, what he did? This guy was, of course, a new breed, a new breed of the Establishment; instead, they went to the hills. He was soft-spoken, but fought hard. He never talked to me of Communism, he talked to the lot of the poor in this country. He opened my eyes, to the inequalities in my own homeland; how the peasants there would borrow ten pesos, the landlords and come back to find that a zero had been slipped in to make their debt a hundred pesos. And they had nowhere to take their grievances. The courts? The landlords, said Taruc, hired the best lawyers to fight simple folk who seldom went more than ten kilometers from where they were born, and would die. Taruc said he had never asked for anything, but an improvement in the lot of the peasants. "If I had wealth," he said, "there were a lot of offers; I could have gotten a million just to stop this revolution."

He said to me: "I say this to you, Mr. Aquino, who were born rich, whose family is landed, in the hope that you will be enlightened about these things. A man had to do something and he said he had felt simply had to fight for those poor peasants. And I thought to myself: 'This is the first Christian I have met.'"

I said to Magaysay; I said to him: "If you love the common tao, so does Taruc; but, as Taruc says, you and he do not serve the common tao in the same way. And you want to make a martyr of this guy?"

"But Magaysay insisted I had got him information. I said to him: "All right, Mr.-President, but let me tell you that an affidavit has been made and Taruc had better not die of poisoning, because that would confirm the affidavit and we will hold you accountable.""

The meeting was secret; Magaysay told the man to meet me in the center of the city. "If Magaysay was conciliatory before, he was furious now. I know the man, his character."

"'What did you tell Taruc?' he cried. I said: 'I told him to hold Lachan everything. Enough is enough!' I said Magaysay, 'until I've had enough of this childishness!' I retorted: 'It may be childishness to you; it's my life to me.'"

And when he swore at me: 'You're not paying me a single centavo; it's the Times that pays my salary. What did you do for you I did from love? What have you ever done for me? When you were down and out I mortgaged what little I had to help you out. Okay, you want to settle accounts?'"

This conversation convinced me that I should never be on this guy's payroll."

This was around mid-year, 1954; with the army's eye trained on him Ninoy found his underground contacts shifting away. He had become "hot," so the rumor went. "My friends in the government community told me I had no future because I could no longer be fixed." He had not seen Taruc since the day the army snatched the superino. "I refused to visit Taruc because I felt so ashamed. I sent my mother and for the next eight years she would visit him regularly."

But I refused to go to him in jail; I vowed I would work for his release and not see him until he was free—and the next time we met again was thirteen years later, when he was out of jail.

Two months after their wild confrontation, Magaysay sent for Ninoy; who found the President amiable again. "He had calmed down, and so had I, since Taruc had not died. But I kept my distance, I didn't care to be close to him again. He made a proposal: 'Look, I want you to go to the United States and make a study of the CIA and the NICA with a view to recommending a restructuring of our intelligence community. Take a few courses there to broaden your outlook; when you come back you'll be a better reporter.'"

I knew he wanted me to go because I was proving to be an embarrassment to him.

But the Times was also for sending its wonder boy abroad. Said Mr. Roces to Ninoy: "It's time you took a rest. You've done enough for one year. Take a trip, go abroad. Write what you want to write, do what you want to do."

There was one thing Ninoy wanted to do: get married—which he did that October of 1954, when he was just a month shy of 22.
For the past year he had been going steady with Miss Corazon Cojuangco and, on the face of it, the mission proposed by Magayay and the vacation leave offered by the Times may have precipitated wonder boy's wedding to Cory Cojuangco—but she says that what really brought on the nuptials was an accident Ninoy got her into during the Tarlac imbroglio. After Cory's accident, Ninoy had said that, well, he supposed he'd have to marry her, having got her into trouble. "As a lover, he's not an emotional person," she says.

Cory Cojuangco, a Sumulong on her mother's side (Don Juan Sumulong was her mother's father), grew up speaking Tagalog rather than Pampango, though nominally from Tarlac, where her father, Don José, had made his fortune and started the political dynasty carried on, in split fashion, by Cory's brother Pepeng and her cousin Eduardo. She supposes that she and Ninoy met as children before the war, in Tarlac, at the various fiestas of his or her clan; but the meeting she clearly remembers was at a birthday party of Don Benigno's, during the war, at the Aquino house in New Manila, where Ninoy shone as brat. It was certainly, says Cory, not love at first sight. "Heavens, no. I was nine years old. What does a nine-year-old girl feel about a nine-year-old boy? I remember Ninoy kept bragging he was a year ahead of me in school; so I didn't even bother to talk to him."

At thirteen, Cory was sent to the United States. "I studied there from second year high through college; I spent seven years of my life there, a year in Philadelphia, the rest of the time in New York, at convent schools, first Notre Dame, a very small school, and then Mount St. Vincent, run by the Sisters of Charity. In college I majored in French and minored in math and was thinking of teaching."

She came home for vacations and in the late '40s met Ninoy again. "We were in our mid-teens, and he was at the Ateneo. There were so many parties and we kept running into each other." But he was still, as far as she was concerned, the brat who had annoyed her by bragging about being a year ahead in school. If he was now running around with girls, she could not have cared less: "Because at that time my idea was to get married to someone much older, at least five or six years older. My father is five years older than my mother and in school they tell you that girls mature faster than boys."

She was in her third year of college when, home for vacation, she met a different Ninoy. "He was already in the Times and this was after Korea. I was impressed because he had been to the war in Korea. Definitely, I had to concede that he was much more intelligent and the most articulate guy I had met. If he was not mature in years, in outlook he was." When she returned to New York they began writing each other. Even his love letters impressed her: "Not mushy, for one thing."

After graduation, she returned to Manila and enrolled in law at the FEU. "I was interested in law not as a profession but as a discipline." She began to see more of Ninoy. "The whole of my last year in New York we had really been writing each other very often. But when I came home I thought it wiser, since we had not really been together all that much, to see first if we really liked each other. So all that year after I graduated, when he was asking me to marry him, I thought it best for us to wait."

By 1954, it was clear that Ninoy and Cory were going steady. He had turned into a very attentive suitor; he dated her, took her to the movies and to dances, even danced with her himself. "Strictly foxtrot and waltz." From time to time he would ask her: "C'mon, have you told your parents?" And Cory would say: "Not yet. I don't think this is the right time yet." Her parents approved of Ninoy, but thought he should finish his law first. Moreover, his mother had been ill earlier that year and the Cojuangcos didn't know if she was well enough for a wedding. The pussyfooting was cut short by Cory's accident.

"Ninoy was taking me to the movies and it happened that my younger sister couldn't come along; we always had a chaperon. So I asked my elder sister Josephine to chaperon us. Going home, we went by Highway 54 — my family lived in Pasay then — and suddenly a jeep hit us from behind, hit the back of Ninoy's white Buick convertible. Such was the impact that the door flew open and first Josephine was thrown out of the car and then I followed. I thought it was the end. Josephine was wearing a full skirt and she just rolled over. But I hit the ground flat and it was full of stones. The highway was just a gravel road then. Luckily it wasn't yet a busy road and no cars came right after. Otherwise I could have been run over because I couldn't get up."

After hitting Ninoy's Buick, the jeep had fled. Since this was at the time when Ninoy was supposed to be "hot", there would be talk afterwards that the accident could have been an attempt on his life. The white convertible was the car he had used to fetch Taruc; the hit-and-run jeep was never tracked down. Because he was at the wheel, Ninoy escaped unhurt, but the Cojuangco sisters were badly bruised. An American going home from playing golf picked them up and rushed them to Lourdes Hospital. No bones were found fractured, but Cory had been slammed so black-and-blue she had to stay overnight at the hospital.

The trouble was that her parents were in Baguio and expected her there the next day: "For a dance that night; and I remember my brother telling me: 'Look, however you may hurt, you better go.
up to Baguio or Mama will think something terrible has happened
to you." Then Niny would really be in a fix. "How could I face
my parents again?" So she went up to Baguio, and Niny followed.

"For once in his life he was really quiet. My parents had said:
'Don't you ever ride in that car again!' Niny said to me, 'Vill tell
from that car on purpose, to force me to marry you. My goodness,
but he now insisted on setting the date! So I had to tell my parents
and they said: 'Let's not have a long engagement.' Their own wedding
anniversary was October 11 and we decided on that day, though it
was only ten days away. So everything was one big rush. But it all
went well." In La Isla Verde, Niny was very surprised at the
sight of Cory Aquino.

Niny and Cory were married at the Parish Church in Palaay.
Our Lady of Sorrows, and Bishop Olalia of Lipa performed the
ceremony. She wore flowers in her hair and a Valera tiara of nylon
tulle with a bouffant skirt banded with pearl-silk. The groom wore
a houndstooth expression. To seal their reconciliation, President Magsaysay
stood sponsor with Dona Aurora Aquino and D. M. and Mrs. Jose
Coyugco. It was a morning wedding and they ate breakfast at the
Winter Garden of the Manila Hotel. Afterwards Niny and Cory left
for their American honeymoon.

Marriage would transform him, from lean kid to roly-poly,
dumping, the fatso of jolly caricature, Niny as a big round smile,
has become so household an image that those who knew him young
find it hard to remember him angular: thin as a stick and with hurt
eyes. But, Cory, even after five children, would keep her wife's girl
figure, and camisa-petal skin.

During their four months in the States, Niny observed training
methods in American spy schools, and did a report on them for
Magsaysay. He and Cory came back in February 1955, too late
for Niny to catch up with classes for his last year of law. They
finished the first semester of the fourth year; only the review courses
remained, but I left during the review courses. "He dropped out, but
for good.

He went back to the Times but now felt he had gone as far in
journalism as he cared to go. "I was writing but my heart was no
longer in it. The traumatic experience with Taruc had shattered some
more, illusions, had increased cynicism about words and covenants,
government, and the presidency.

Two months after he came back from his honeymoon, he seized
a chance to buy land in Concepcion and, determined to turn farmer,
resigned from the Times. "I told Mr. Roces there was no more future
for me in journalism. It was okay while I was a bachelor, but now
I was married. I would have to be thinking of my family. Mr. Roces
was kind; he said: 'No, Niny, just take a leave of absence. And

when you want to come back, come back. We'll keep your desk for
you — and your typewriter." But Niny knew he was leaving for

In his five years in journalism he had made more splash than
most newsmen do in a lifetime. But that part of his education was
over. He would always regard it with affection, however.

"The Times was the only employer I ever had. I was 17 when
I started there, 22 when I left. During that time Mr. Roces became
like a second father to me; most of the things that were to be my
norm, I got from him. From Joe Bautista, that good guy, that kind
old man, who never raised his voice, never got sore, always forgave
and always was good for a touch, I got what I called my 'Bautista
syndrome.' During my governorship I could not fire anyone, especially
if they brought their eight children weeping to plead with me; it was
my weakness as an administrator — and I think I got that from my
mother and from Joe. From Dave Boguslav I learned staccato
journalese: who, what, where, when; short words, brief sentences,
concise reports. I learned much from him — but he had his hang-ups:
Nehru was bad; Communism was evil; America could do no wrong.
The old colonial hang-ups. That's why I think the resurgence of
nationalism in the Philippines began when those white editors
disappeared from the scene. When I was in journalism all the papers
had white men on them: McCulloch Dick, Theo Rogers, Marvin
Grey, Ken Macke, Dave Boguslav, Paul Wilkins. Then came the
shift. The press started dishing out a stronger nationalist line; the
pure tautism to the Kano declined — and practically at the same
time the white editors faded away."

Niny thinks that the "turning point" (possibly because of the
Magsaysay-Recto clash over pro-Americanism) was 1955, a year that
was certainly a turning point in his own life. In the summer of '55
he ended his career as the boy wonder of Philippine journalism and,
thinking to go back to the land, found himself plunging into politics.
A few months after he left the Times, he was running for mayor of
Concepcion. His bride had known all along that he would sooner or
later be making that plunge.

"When he was courting me," says Cory Aquino, "he always said
he wasn't going into politics, not really anyway. Oh, I had my
apprehensions. But I myself didn't expect it would be that soon!"