about his provincialism when he first took office as President. I suspect it was this that the villagers glimpsed just often enough to respond to his wily appeals for their votes.

One morning shortly after my conversation with Dorcas I mentioned the cave that is supposed to lie beneath Mt. Malindig to my godson. He is now nearly thirty, but when he was a teenager he and I had once climbed the mountain without, as I recall, hearing anything about a cave ‘Sabi,’ he says non-committally. They say, ‘They say the cave exists but that it is only a part’ A part of what? Of the underground truth, apparently, which is that the whole interior of this island province is hollow. Somewhere beneath us there is also a fabulous treasure: a giant baka. A gold cow, no less. My godson tells me that the activities of the copper-mining company that has dominated this province’s economy for the last quarter century have gradually eaten away two of the cow’s legs. In early 1996 thousands of tons of slurry from the mine’s tailings pit poured out through an illegally constructed tunnel and smothered the province’s main river system, killing it stone dead. The ecological damage caused a state of emergency to be declared and led to the shutdown of the company’s operations. ‘People say it was punishment for having hacked off the baka’s legs,’ my godson says. ‘Sabi.’ Maybe it was also just deserts for disturbing the province’s subterranean aquifer system which might or might not be the reason for Kansulay’s river drying up. Since this same company was for years secretly owned by Marcos himself via a series of holding companies, one suspects the golden cow is actually The Golden Calf.

I ask him if the ‘beautiful white lady’ whom Até Susing’s daughters had seen was the same person as the alluring woman in the cave who had given miraculous food and drink to the anti-Japanese guerrillas during the war. ‘I expect so,’ he said. ‘Maria Malindig is everywhere. She is the spirit of this province. Sabi. I am touched to see he is still wearing the little gold cross I gave him for a birthday years ago.’
phrase. For it is undeniable that a good deal of the behaviour that has earned her the virtuous ridicule of Filipinos themselves is quite normal by local standards. The extravaganza, the queenly capri-

ciousness, the empty-headed partying with showbiz personalities and the jetting around on international brand-name shopping sprees of the most vulgar kind— all of these are exemplified (or aspired to) daily by Manila’s avant-garde socialites. The difference is that Mrs Marcos had, and has, real substance beneath the gloss. She has never been as empty-headed as she sometimes seemed, and still less was she empty-hearted. Glaring faults, certainly; but glaring virtues, too, among which a perverse simplicity. It is impossible to meet her à deux without carrying away an impression of naïve sincerity. This is all the stranger since she is a consummate politician and has appropriate (and well-attested) gifts, such as never forgetting names and faces, which nobodies like myself are apt to find flattering. But as the years go by one is less easily flattered as well as better at spotting such tricks of the trade. In Mrs Marcos’s case, though, I do not believe they are false. She actually does like people and finds them interesting; it is touching that she so patently believes what she says, especially when not a little of it is distinctly dotty. Certainly, the one thing I had never expected was to find myself touched. She is a very complex lady indeed.

In Kansalaya, any anti-Imelda feeling tended to follow a conven-
tional sexist line, viewing her as the quintessential scheming, woman who, for her own purposes, had wormed her way into a good man’s heart and taken advantage of his illness. Dr Alma Fernandez of the University of the Philippines told me she had been in New York in 1990 at the time of Mrs Marcos’s acquittal on all RICO (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations) charges that had been brought against her. There and then Dr Fernandez had written an article for the Filipino newspaper Malaya that was something of a feminist reading of Imelda’s career, her arraignment and general fall from grace. She said it had proved quite easy to do since Mrs Marcos was such a classic victim of a male-dominated society. I took her to refer to life in the upper echelons of global politics rather than in the Philippines, where machismo is over-valued but powerful women are a recognized type, until I reminded myself of Imelda Marcos’s awful childhood.

as well as the ruthless way in which she was wooed, won and sub-
sequently moulded by her much older husband.

Imelda Romualdez, too, makes a good start

* Her father, Vicente Orestes, was a lawyer who worked in the family law firm (Romualdez, Romualdez y Romualdez) with his two older and far more successful brothers. By most accounts he was an easy-going man, somewhat artistic (he played the piano and sang), who favoured a quiet life. Unfortunately his first wife, Juana Acereda—like herself, descended from a Spanish priest—died leaving him with five children to bring up. He married again, this time to a girl he selected from a convent, Remedios Trinidad. At this point all hopes of a quiet life ceased because his children much resented their new stepmother, whom they considered not

only an intruder but déclassée since she was brown-skinned. Imelda was Vicente Orestes’ first child by Remedios Trinidad, and four more were to follow. Long before then, open family warfare had broken out between the two sets of children to the extent that Remedios Trinidad moved out of her husband’s big house and went with her children to live in the garage, sharing it with her hus-

and’s hire-purchased car, an Essex Super 6. At night the children slept on boards propped up on milk crates while their mother bedded down on a table. The last of Vicente Orestes’ children, Conchita, was conceived in this garage. Half a century later Imelda’s own niece, Beatriz Romualdez Francia, was to describe the position thus:  

The vacillating and enigmatic Vicente Orestes commuted

between the big house with his first set of children, and the garage with his second wife and their children together. He would drop by at the garage before going to work, and then at night before retiring.

[Remedios] sent her daughter Imelda to the big house early each morning to get their daily allowance— a modest sum. In this way Imelda began at an early age to learn the rules of a painful

* For the detailed outline of Mrs Marcos’s biography in this chapter I am deeply indebted to three main sources: authors Kerima Polotan Tuvera, Carmen Navarro Pedrosa and Beatriz Romualdez Francia.
game and negotiate between two worlds. She learned to mediate between a father who identified himself with the Hispanic and Caucasian class—both the advantages of and privileges only a few decades before and still continued to do so under the American colonial government—and a mother who was classified with the subjugated, indigenous Filipinos.

It is perhaps worth noting that this old stone house of Vicente Orestes' was on General Solano Street, practically on the Pasig River and only yards from Malacañang Palace where Imelda was to get all sorts of sweet revenge only a couple of decades later. This was one ancestral home she did not restore. On the contrary, she bought it together with the two adjacent lots, bulldozed the entire site, and turned it into a garden. All mention of a childhood spent partly in a garage as the outcast of her step-family was excised from the record until 1970, when the journalist Carmen Navarro Pedrosa dug up the unwelcome facts and published them in her remarkably brave book, *The Untold Story of Imelda Marcos.*

Since it is the lot of thousands of ordinary Filipinos to be conceived, born and to live their lives in garages and shanties, the conventionally heartless might say it was excellent training for a future First Lady, a salutary taste of how the other half lives. That, of course, is precisely how a child cannot see her own life, especially when she is not yet ten years old. This experience, and the even worse poverty that awaited her and her siblings in Leyte, must have set up within little Imelda the sorts of splits and fissures anyone might inherit from childhood stress, but which only extreme power and wealth can later magnify into the behavioural chasms that show up on either side the monster and the angel.

In 1937 Remedios gave birth to Conchita, her sixth and last child. Feeling the onset of labour the ex-convent girl stoically took herself off in a taxi without a word to her husband in the big house and checked into the free (i.e. paupers') ward of the Philippine General Hospital. Three days later she tottered back into the garage on General Solano carrying her new baby. Her husband took it as a deliberate slight that she had vanished without telling him, and even more so that she had gone to a paupers' ward. (Beatriz Romualdez Frana says that, forty years later, Imelda Marcos took steps to cover up the fact that her youngest sister had been born in a free ward by having a Dr. Reginaldo Villanueva at the General Hospital prepare 'an affidavit stating that Conchita Romualdez was born in the pay ward. Villanueva was told to cooperate at the line with the veiled threat that his children abroad would be safer if he acceded to [this] request.' To set against this, however, is the fact that the rebuilding of the hospital, which arguably still offers Manila's best medical services for those Filipinos too poor to pay, was one of Imelda's major projects when she eventually came to power.) Four months after Conchita's birth, Remedios died of double pneumonia and the eight-year-old Imelda watched her mother laid to rest in La Loma cemetery. From descriptions by Mrs. Francisca and others, the shadowy Remedios reminds me of almost anyone from Kansulay, which makes me warm to her memory. The melancholy, the stubbornness, the almost romantically proud acceptance of a garage floor instead of a marriage bed: all these are recognizably indigenous traits far distant from those of an ideal mate for the aloofly Hispanic Vicente Orestes.

By September of that year, 1938, this dreamiest of the three Romualdez brothers decided to quit Manila, where financial success had constantly eluded him. The big house on General Solano, which was anyway mortgaged, was sold. The Essex Super 6, no longer functioning and also overdue in its instalment payments, was sold out of the garage and back to the dealers. The selling up of his Manila assets barely paid his debts. His plan was to retreat to the province of Leyte where his Spanish grandfather had been a priest, where the Romualdez dynasty had effectively been founded in 1873 and where his illustrious and scholarly brother Norberto was an Assemblyman. There he intended to retire from the law and administer the estates of his more prosperous Romualdez relatives, meanwhile living off whatever income could be derived from their coconut plantations. The truth was, he had little interest in money. The double widower wanted to get well away from the city in which he had conspicuously failed to prosper and sit beside the blue, blue sea of a distant province, dipping into books and humming tunes to himself. Sixty years on this seems entirely sympathetic, although with a large family to keep it might be considered irresponsible by bourgeois standards. It certainly had undreamed-of consequences.
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The move sealed the fate of his branch of the family and cast them forever as poor relations to the rich Romualdez family of Manila. This change in family status would be critical to Imelda's development and would set her ambitions even more firmly.

In the ten years that followed, which of course included three of Japanese occupation, Vicente Orestes and his family moved about Leyte’s little capital town of Tacloban, finally coming to rest in a Quonset hut on Calle Real. Such was Imelda’s home in her formative early teens. Her father largely read the war away. When General MacArthur finally returned, landing in Leyte, Vicente Orestes took Imelda up to the local US Army camp to beg surplus materials in order to spruce up their hut. They also begged for food. They were not alone, of course. Their living conditions and diet were no doubt much like that of Tacloban’s other citizens. Even before the war it had never been a place of full bellies and flush toilets. In later years Imelda quite often spoke of the hunger and poverty of those days, although she only ever did so to other family members.

She described how her mouth would water whenever she saw neighbours who had margarine with their bread for breakfast. In her home breakfast was limited to a native roll and black coffee. The roll would not wait for late wakers, either. Food was strictly rationed, and any child who wanted more was reprimanded with ‘only those who work get fed’. She remembers that her father used to save his coins in a bamboo pole so he could afford a leg of ham when Christmas came. ‘If we had a slice of ham, then it was a feast.’

The ‘bamboo pole’ might have been a doot jamb, still occasionally used even today in Kansulay as the family’s piggy-bank, while the yearning for margarine was to manifest itself years later in a slightly different guise. This I learned about from a friend who acted as a NAMFREL (National Movement for Free Elections) observer during the snap election in 1986. She told me that after the Marcoses had fled Malacañang Palace she had gone poking about the many outhouses and storeroms in the Palace grounds and had come upon a modest, nondescript little house tucked away among the trees. Once inside, she had found it impossible to explore further because it turned out that every room and even the hallway was stacked ceiling-high with cartons of Heinz sandwich spread in catering-sized jars. Only then did she recall having heard that Imelda had once confessed to a craving for sandwich spread because in her childhood it had seemed the very epitome of luxury and elegance and had practically symbolized the unattainable. In its pathos there is a certain ‘Rosebud’ quality about this forgotten house of sandwich spread that is somehow lacking in other extravagances and oddities which had come to light and were then attracting greater attention in the newly vacated palace, such as the gallon bottles of Dior and Guerlain scent and the bulletproof bras.

By the time General MacArthur’s troops waded ashore in Leyte, Imelda was sixteen and already acknowledged as the prettiest girl in Tacloban. She was much in demand for adding glamour to civic functions and she often went, heavily chaperoned, to sing for the GIs at the camp. She had a good voice and her confidence — so different from the usual probinsiyana bashfulness — showed the pleasure she took in an audience. One day by special request she found herself singing to a huge assembly of troops that included MacArthur himself as well as living Berlin, who was on tour with the USO (United Service Organizations). She was asked to sing Berlin’s own song, ‘God Bless America’, and obliged, but on her own initiative changed the wording to ‘God Bless the Philippines’. She reported the composer as being ‘aghast at my impertinence’ until she explained that the Philippines and America were really one world. According to her, Berlin promptly wrote another song which Imelda equally promptly sang: ‘Heaven watch the Filipinos/Keep her safe from harm... Friendly with America/Let her always be...’ Anyone might feel free to wonder a little at the self-possession and temerity of a sixteen-year-old Filipina correcting a famous American composer’s song for him, as at her suspiciously well-developed nationalism at the very moment of the US landings. Possibly the account itself underwent, like Berlin’s original song, some judicious minor adjustment.

Certainly the handwritten fragments of Imelda that survive from this period show no trace of such feisty individualism. On the contrary, they are touching in their ordinary schoolgirlishness. One
is a list of the sort of biographical details teenagers think define
them. She gives her nickname as ‘Meldy’, her motto as ‘I try to
succeed’, her ambition as ‘any desk work or to be a – – – –
Them!’ (for which four-spaced blank Carmen Pedrosa proposes the
word ‘wife’). Otherwise we learn that Meldy’s hobbies were ‘singing,
reading, going to movies, letter writing’, that her favourite subject
was ‘loremaking, ha!’, that her favourite dish was ‘fried chicken
and ice cream’, that her favourite actress was Ingrid Bergman and
her favourite expressions ‘Nuts!’ and ‘Hubba! Hubba!’ (‘Hubba-
hubba’ was a classic piece of Second World War US military slang,
defined as ‘an exclamation of delight, relish, etc. esp. at the sight of
a woman’, which no doubt commended it to young Meldy who, in
common with everyone else, liked to be appreciated.) Perhaps
more revealing was an entry in a schoolmate’s autograph book
which reads: ‘Dearest Polly, Keep that smile on your lips, But
always put that [sic] tears in your heart. Love; Meldy.’ This is
accompanied by a competent little sketch of a girl with a weeping
heart. It would be silly to read too much into conventional things
of this sort, but the idea of hiding one’s grief and presenting a smiling
face to the world is indeed very Filipino (as is her English), and the
Mrs Marcos of later years showed she had fully mastered this trick
of Asian stoicism, which does not preclude shedding tears for
effect.

Well before she became a local beauty queen (‘The Rose of
Taclaban’) Imelda was attracting suitors, and like many a pretty girl
before or after might well have settled for a prosperous husband
and lived out the rest of her life in the province where her family
name had distinction. But two things combined to take her back to
Manila. One was the unwanted attention of a particularly insistent
admirer and the other her genuine musical talent. Two Romualdez
cousins in Manila, struck equally by her looks and her ability,
offered to arrange singing lessons and a helping hand in the big
city. In 1952, at the age of twenty-three, she left for Manila with her
cousin Danilo as escort. It was a moment perfectly designed for the
‘little-could-they-have-guessed’ school of biography.

Thus did Imelda leave Tacloban, the small town that made her
queen, that helped her bury the memory that she was Remedios’s deprived child. It was time to go. Leyte had nothing

more to offer Imelda. Little did Danieling realize that the trem-
bling country cousin he accompanied on the fateful journey to
Manila, with five pesos in her purse and a dirty tampil (a poor
native suitcase), carrying only a few skirts and blouses, held the
formula for one of the most remarkable success stories in
Philippine political history.

In order to avoid a misleading impression (of country hick and
earnest mentor) we need to recall that Daniel Romualdez was by
then Congressman for Tacloban, that his trembling cousin was a
famously beautiful woman of considerable interior poise, and that
they did not take a steerage passage on an inter-island ferry but
flew on Philippine Airlines’ afternoon flight to Manila.

Once there, Imelda roomed in her Congressman cousin’s house
and soon became familiar with the daily ebb and flow of political
grandees as well as with the general tenor of life in power-broking
circles. She herself was treated more indulgently than inclusively
by her cousins, who found her a job in a music store on Escolta, the
old Spanish main street of downtown Manila that nowadays forms
part of Chinatown. In this store she sang to buyers of sheet music
or else demonstrated pianos by playing them to prospective cus-
tomers. (Forty-five years later I asked the redoubtable Lucrecia
‘King’ Kasig, herself a noted composer and doyenne of the
Cultural Centre’s musical activities, about Mrs Marcos’s actual
musical ability. Was she, I wondered, what one would call a good
pianist? Mrs Kasig, a staunch Imeldista, frowned at a filing cabi-
et: ‘Not necessarily,’ she said at length.)

Imelda served in the music shop until Vicente Orestes unex-
ectedly turned up one day. He wanted to see how his daughter
was getting along in the big bad city and found her singing to some
customers. Outraged, he accused Danieling of ‘selling’ Imelda and
insisted she be moved to a job commensurate with the dignity of a
decent girl. One was promptly found for her as a clerk in the
Intelligence Division of the Central Bank, an institution where any
decent girl might pick up a trick or two. It did, however, fulfill
the teenage Meldy’s ambition of ‘any desk work’. After work each
day she took singing lessons at the Philippine Women’s University
Conservatory of Music. Then, after an editor of the Manila Chronicle
had spotted her by chance on the street, she appeared on the cover

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143 America's Boy

Imelda Romualdez, too, makes a good start

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of This Week (the 15 February 1953 Valentine issue) as 'the lass from Leyte - Imelda Romualdez.' It was essentially from that moment that Imelda became a public figure, a role she has since filled for almost half a century. Deciding to run as Miss Manila in a beauty contest that was itself a preliminary stage in the quest for a new Miss Philippines, she found her own family implacably opposed to sponsoring her. Beauty contests were vulgar affairs and Romualdez's did not demean themselves with such things.

So Imelda obtained the backing of the president of the Philippine Women's University, Mrs Benitez, as well as of Mrs Kasigla, the head of the university's Department of Music. Against all predictions the title of Miss Manila went to a Norma Jimenez. Imelda was disbelieving, then angry. Where anyone else might have accepted fate and consolated herself with the thought that, well, it was only a beauty contest, she went directly to the Mayor of Manila, Arsenio Lacson, and charged that the contest had been fixed. She must have been a formidable presence: tall, beautiful, furious and judiciously tearful. Two days after the original press release of Jimenez's victory the following announcement went into all Manila's major newspapers:

Mayor Lacson yesterday disowned the choice of the International Fair Board and named Imelda Romualdez of Philippine Women's University as Manila's official candidate for Miss Philippines.

In a letter to the director of the International Fair, Lacson charged violation of certain rules of the International Fair contest that as Mayor of Manila he would nominate the only candidate of the City of Manila for the beauty contest. The beauty contest committee named by Mayor Lacson adjudged Miss Romualdez winner of the Miss Manila title with 655 points. Norma Jimenez and Amparo Manuel tied for second place with 453 points each.

This was a splendidly Filipino piece of in-fighting in a culture where everything is negotiable, even retrospectively, and competition winners - like examination or election results - can be almost indefinitely reconsidered in the light of 'delayed information' in the form of writs, threats or plain family connections. As it turned out, Imelda was not on her way to becoming Miss Philippines, for Mayor Lacson's overruling was itself promptly overruled. The International Fair sponsoring the contest decided that the Mayor of Manila was not eligible to choose the candidate for Manila, and reinstated Norma Jimenez. By then it no longer mattered to Imelda. What counted was what she had learned about her own will. 'To try is to succeed', indeed. For students of her later history, some significant names had entered her life as a consequence of this episode: Mrs Kasigla, Mrs Benitez and Mayor Lacson. And the girl who went on to win the 1953 title of Miss Philippines was Cristina Galang who, as Cristina Caedo, eventually became one of Imelda Marcos's famous band of private aides - somewhere between gofers and groupies - known collectively as the 'Blue Ladies.'

After this came a brief affair with an eligible young man, Ariston 'Titong' Nakpil, who was cultured (a Harvard-trained architect) and of excellent family. He had one drawback, however, in that he was already married. This marriage was in the process of being annulled (which it eventually was) but the situation produced delay and uncertainty as well as the furious opposition of Imelda's father. It cannot have been an easy time for her. Mixing with Ariston's family, who incidentally took to her and showed her great kindness, made her aware of how much of a provincial she was among Manila's elite. Her accent gave her away, while her social manner - natural and spontaneous though they were - lacked the requisite polish. She was now twenty-four, by provincial standards old enough to be aware of a clock ticking somewhere in the background, certainly old enough to marry anyone she chose, regardless of what her father thought. On the evening of 6 April 1954 she went to Congress with the wife of her distinguished cousin Danieling, who was then acting Speaker of the House. When she arrived, a Congressman named Ferdinand E. Marcos was sounding off about something on the floor of the house, but politics of that sort bored Imelda and she and her friend went off to the cafeteria to wait for the session to end. When it did, Marcos himself came into the cafeteria, took one look at her and demanded an introduction.

There followed a famous eleven-day courtship that was to become a significant ingredient in the Marcos dyad's mythology since it not only exemplified that old heart-warmer, love at first
sight, but more importantly, fate. According to this, Ferdinand and Imelda were made for each other but they had anyway been destined to meet because fate itself had plans for them as well as for the Philippines, and the two strands, the private and the national, were indissolubly intertwined. (As President, Ferdinand was to ‘write’ the first four volumes of a projected multi-volume complete history of the Philippines called Tadhana, or ‘Destiny’, which was actually ghosted by a committee of scholars, mostly from the University of the Philippines. Apart from an inevitable unevenness in style, the series starts not badly; but it is hard to see how, had they reached the twentieth century, a certain slant in events could have been avoided. Presidents do not commission histories of their nation by accident. As we shall see, Imelda also commissioned a book, Si Malakas at Si Maganda, which makes explicit the predestined nature of her and her husband’s relationship, as also that of the First Couple as Mother and Father to their country. But this is to leap ahead.)

We left Ferdinand Marcos in the late 1940s having had a good war. In 1949 he was elected Congressman for Ilocos Norte in his father Mariano’s old district, running on a platform that included a promise to obtain benefits from the US government for all Filipino veterans of the recent war. By 1954 he was a millionaire, commuting between Congress and his leafy suburban home in San Juan in a shiny white convertible. During his first term as a Congressman, the Senate President was Jose Avelino, who had himself made half a million dollars during his own first congressional term. A casual remark of Avelino’s became the most famous thing he ever said. Referring to his fellow politicians, he exclaimed: ‘We are not angels! What are we in power for? When Jesus Christ died on the cross he made the distinction between a good crook and the bad crooks. We can prepare to be good crooks.’

By the time Ferdinand met Imelda, then, he was an excellent crook in Avelino’s sense, and conceivably in other senses as well. Like any Filipino politician he was making money by using his influence, by being a fixer, by ‘facilitating’ import licences and so forth, and by involvement in sundry business ventures that included tobacco-growing and cigarette-importing. In this area he had dealings with a carpetbagger named Harry Stonehill, a GI who had stayed on after the war’s end and taken advantage of the carve-up of Washington’s generous $2 billion aid. Stonehill, a gifted entrepreneur, unwisely kept a ‘blue book’ listing people he had dealt with. Inevitably it was found and in 1962 he was to be deported from the Philippines to the sound of trumpets on the orders of President Macapagal. Among other things the blue book revealed was that Macapagal had used Stonehill’s funds for his presidential campaign. Another name that cropped up in it was that of Ferdinand Marcos. Apart from Ferdinand’s expected activities as a wheeler-dealer in Congress there was another possible source of his sudden private wealth. It has long been assumed that he and some comrades from his alleged wartime guerrilla band, Maharlika, had used their links with the Japanese to find at least part of the fortune the occupiers had buried as the ‘Yamashita treasure’. This is what Mrs Marcos said to me on the subject in 1997:

My husband’s war comrades sold the remains of the Yamashita treasure while he was briefly in the US. [Ferdinand had gone to Washington in May 1947 as a member of a team sent by the Philippine Veterans Commission to negotiate the payment of $160 million in benefits and back pay.] He didn’t get rich on that, but it introduced him to precious metals trading. By 1949 he already had 4,000 tons of gold.

Four thousand tons? That is what she said, making me feel an unworlthy naif who still thinks gold is reckoned in tonne ounces. Be that as it may, the Yamashita treasure has certainly been taken very seriously for the last half-century. Its relevance to Marcos-watchers is that many Filipinos, including people who worked with Ferdinand, are convinced that he found some—but probably not all—of the loot. (It is the remainder that continues to lure ex-Green Berets like Charles McDougald, ex-CIA men like Singaleb and sundry Filipino dreamers.) It is widely believed that in the last weeks of the war Ferdinand became privy to information about the hiding places of several caches of treasure, dug them up, and once the war was over, sold them. To have become ‘privy’ to this sort of knowledge might seem to suggest excellent connections with the Japanese, or else an extraordinary amount of dumb luck. In any
case, this allegedly formed the basis of his prodigious wealth, which was thus acquired before he went into politics. Once he was President, the theory proceeds, he used his Ilocano-dominated military to track down other caches of treasure and added those to his private hoard. And it was for this reason, it is said, that he commissioned a gold refinery in Manila: ostensibly so that the Philippines could at last refine its own gold from mines such as BENGUET, but in reality so that bars of Japanese and other gold could be re-smelted into untraceable bullion before being spirited away to Swiss banks.

The counter-theory runs that this whole Yamashita treasure story is pure hokum, but has been most carefully played up by the Marcoses as a way of explaining Ferdinand’s private wealth, which in fact came from far more despicable dealings, cheating and carpetbagging in the aftermath of war. That is why (they say) Imelda Marcos so cheerfully brandies these huge tonnages of gold about in conversations on the subject of her husband’s wealth: it is all a smokescreen. That is why (according to them) Imelda Marcos keeps harping on the notion that her husband’s astuteness as one of the world’s biggest private dealers in precious metals supported, rather than undermined the Philippine economy.” Tarquin Olivier, the son of Laurence Olivier, set up the Thomas de la Rue refinery here in Manila to refine gold. It was Ferdinand’s private money that went to the Government and its projects. The PGH [Philippine General Hospital] and the LRT [Light Rail Transit] were both built without a single cent of Government funds,” she says.10

The observation of a Filipino with a lifelong connection with the gold industry may be appended as a final comment:

In the 1960s and until 1974 the Philippines was the free world’s second largest producer of gold after South Africa — superior even to the US and Canada. It was a major product, with six or seven gold mines. The Johnson Matthey (de la Rue) refinery was set up in 1975 and enabled the Philippines to do its own refining to world standards. By law the gold had to be sold to the Central Bank. Theoretically, between about 1977 and 1982 Marcos was in a position to ‘buy’ all the gold mined and refined in the Philippines at a discount. Practically, he could steal the lot.

That Ferdinand Marcos was already astoundingly wealthy by 1954 can hardly be left out of the equation when it comes to considering the ‘whirlwind romance’ that ensued from his chance meeting with Imelda Romualdez in the House cafeteria. Decorum is usually preserved by presenting him as making all the running: the ambitious young Congressman swept off her feet by the ingenue ex-beauty queen. Certainly his eleven-day wooing of her now seems less of a courtship (which implies a degree of old-fashioned etiquette) than an amorous bulldozing. On the day of their first meeting Imelda was still thinking of herself as the all-but-diancée of Ariston Nakipil. In less than a fortnight she found herself married to a rich, handsome and youngish Congressman. She agreed to join Ferdinand and a reporter friend of his, Jose Guevara, on a five-hour car trip to the northern mountain resort of Baguio. They left Manila on Ash Wednesday and on Good Friday Imelda signed the marriage certificate. I do not know whether Ferdinand had told her that as a matter of fact he was already engaged and had been living with his fiancée, Carmen Ortega, for some years in his large villa in San Juan, Manila, and had four children by her. Presumably he must have, for that engagement had been publicly announced not long before, and the same villa to which he was bringing Imelda as his new bride would surely have shown traces of its former occupant and her children, now hastily re-accommodated elsewhere. In any case Imelda apparently returned from Baguio flashing a ring set with eleven diamonds, one for each day of their courtship. In terms of pure practicality it would surely have been hard to have had an expensive ring made to order within hours over the Easter holiday in a provincial town. Had he planned the whole thing in advance and driven up with the ring already made in his pocket, the number of diamonds privately significant to him for numerical reasons? There is something missing from this myth, just as there is from the story I was told by a fellow Ilocano of Marcos’s, the Congressman Roquito Ablan. He said Ferdinand’s father, Mariano, told him before the war that he had named all his children sequentially after a sentence in a school history text: ‘Ferdinand Magellan was sent on the orders of Queen Elizabeth across the Pacific to seek fortune’: thus, in order, Ferdinand and his siblings Elizabeth, Pacifico and Fortuna. Unless Mariano was gifted
with uncanny prescience — and his failure to avoid a revolting
death suggests he was not — it is improbable that he can have
known in advance the genders of his yet-unborn children. But
myths have their own narrative conventions.

How is Imelda’s sudden capture to be interpreted? That a
provincial innocent was swept along by the glitter and determi-
ation of a rich public figure twelve years her senior and simply
overwhelmed? But that hardly squares with the girl who had the
time to go alone to the Mayor of Manila and talk him into over-
turning the result of a beauty contest. Clearly, a determined
character was not restricted to Ferdinand. One might guess that the
licking of Imelda’s inner clock had been getting louder and the
Nakpil affair seemed set to drag on indefinitely. Here, by contrast,
was this rich and ambitious man whom people were already
tipping as a future presidential candidate, with a famous Bar re-
putation and an increasingly famous war record. It must have seemed
like an opportunity for putting memories of garage floors, earth
closets and singing to GIs behind her for good, as well as a way of
showing that her father’s run of bad luck was not irrevocably
the lot of that particular branch of the otherwise distinguished
Romualdez family.

And as for Ferdinand, what did he have to gain by marriage at
this point? He was already well known as a philanderer, which
had never yet done any harm to a male politician’s career in the
Philippines. His recent engagement to Carmen Ortega presum-
ably meant that at the age of thirty-seven he, too, had begun to feel
the clock was ticking for him. And maybe he was plain bored with
his common-law family, wanted a break and chose a beauty queen.
Other men have done the same. Or there again, maybe it really
was a matter of true love on both sides. We shall probably never
know. In any case, the church wedding that followed their hasty
civil union was lavish indeed and was treated by the newspapers
as a glamorous social event of public note. Some of the more over-
wrought copy was similar to that produced at the time of Prince
Charles and Lady Diana’s wedding in 1981, at least in terms of the
‘fairytale’ imagery. Imelda and Ferdinand made, after all, an
exceptionally glittering and handsome couple.

The ensuing eleven years, during which the Marcoses lived in
the well-appointed villa in San Juan, saw the birth of two daughters
and a son. They also marked Imelda’s transformation from a
housewife into a politician’s wife, a rite of passage that cost her
dear. This painful moulding process was surely an instance of what
would prompt Dr Alma Fernandez to a ‘feminist’ reading of
Imelda’s life in 1990, at a time when most of the Western world’s
press had declared open season on Marcos’s widow.

When she first moved into the house in San Juan her new hus-
band would not allow her to change anything, so presumably she
found herself living with furniture and decor chosen by her hus-
band’s live-in fiancée. Most days she would travel down to
Divisoria market in downtown Manila (near what was then the
city’s main railway terminus, Tutuban station) where she did the
catering. She also bought material for her own dresses in Divisoria,
suddenly finding herself having to live a remarkably social life. She
was asked to model clothes for charity shows and was constantly
invited to be a sponsor at weddings, baptisms and confirmations.
She had the support of her own clan in that her favourite younger
brother Benjamin (‘Kokoy’) came to live with them and was eventu-
ally followed to Manila by her other siblings. (At this time
Kokoy’s girlfriend was Ninoy Aquino’s sister, Mau. Young
Benigno Aquino Jr. had recently made a name for himself as an
intrepid reporter in the Korean War, and this early link between the
Romualdez and Aquino clans may, in the light of Ninoy’s assassi-
nation twenty-eight years later, have represented the high spot in
their relations.) Then in 1955 Vicente Orestes, now aged seventy
and gaunt with lung cancer, died in Manila. At her father’s death
Imelda might have felt partially vindicated, for he had at least
lived to see his branch of the family back on the road to social
rehabilitation, thanks to his daughter’s brilliant marriage. She her-
self was pregnant at the time. One of her nephews, watching her
during the funeral, reported that she was so upset when her
father’s coffin was lowered into the grave she lost her footing and
fell into the hole on top of it.

Perhaps the most difficult thing for Imelda to cope with was
living a life in which she was expected simultaneously to be a
housewife, a young mother concerned with running a family
home, and a hostess to the constant stream of people who
tramped through it at all hours of day and night, needing to be
fed. These were her husband’s political allies, ward leaders
and supporters, many of them uncouth by her standards and some of them frankly goons. She found herself

... repelled by his kind of life, a life in which absolute strangers descended on her house and left it messed up, torn up, rent apart. They walked right into her bedroom, and political schedules began to be sheer physical torture. Crowning fiesta queens, she waited on one stage after another, in heat or in cold, in wind or in rain, from dusk to the small hours, until she was ready to drop. The crowds that surged through her house made all peace impossible, and one had to have a smile and a coin for every outstretched hand. The horror is epitomized in the story that, one day, handing a coin to a woman with a baby in arms, she had lifted the swaddling cloth and seen that the baby was dead.

This new life also required an abrupt shift in her attitude to money. The Rose of Ilocoban, who until recently had had to scrimp on meals in order to be able to afford a new pair of shoes to wear in her office at the Central Bank, later told Mrs Francia’s Auntie Loring that as a young bride

she was taken aback when one evening a stranger deposited a dirty sack in the middle of her living room. She quickly told the servant to take the sack to the kitchen, but before the fellow could carry out her order, Ferdinand smilingly instructed him to take it instead to the master bedroom. Pulling his wife aside, Ferdinand informed her that the sack contained money; he also made it clear to her that this would not be the last of its kind.

On seeing the puzzlement and scepticism on Auntie Loring’s face, Imelda went over to lift the cover from her bed. There lay a dirty-looking sack under it. She pulled it out and showed Auntie Loring how it was stuffed with money.

(By 1960, the year after Ferdinand’s election to the Senate, Imelda had already become accustomed to such things, even complacent, confessing to Auntie Loring: ‘Money doesn’t mean much to me any more... Our money comes in sacks. I’m tired of counting money.’)

Once again, to keep this culturally in proportion, it has to be remembered that Philippine politics was, and at election time still is, conducted in cash; and the nearer to the grass roots, the truer this becomes. Campaigns in particular call for prodigious quantities of ready cash, mainly in low-denomination notes. (This was why, when in 1986 the Marcoses were forced to flee the country, so many million Philippine pesos were found in their luggage by US officials who flew them out. The discovery readily lent itself to yet more stories about their having cleaned out the nation’s coffers; or going into exile, when in fact the money comprised KRC [the Marcos political party] cash left over from the recent snap election campaign that Ferdinand was taking home to Ilocos Norte— which he had been told was his destination. By the time the Marcoses were informed they were actually going to Hawaii, it was too late. Had they known this in advance, it seems inconceivable they would have bothered to take masses of Philippine peso banknotes to the United States, where the exchange rate at the time of the crisis—assuming they could even have found someone willing to change it—was absurdly unfavourable.)

Imelda’s intense dislike of so many aspects of her new circumstances has scarcely been made more bearable by her husband’s determination to turn her into an urban sophisticate. This involved not only his giving her improving books to read with the significant passages marked in pencil on which he later quizzed her, but extended to an obsession with her tendency to over-eat. (A remark was later attributed to him to the effect that he hadn’t married Cinderella to see her turn into the pumpkin.) His own interest in gastronomy was virtually nil, and such pleasure as he did take in the table extended little further than plain Ilocano vegetable dishes like pinakbet. His young wife, though, had many years of penury to make up for, together with all sorts of unsassuaged cravings. Imelda had always known that, given the chance, she was going to be a champagne-and-fine-gras sort of girl; and this apparently led to a period when on Ferdinand’s instruction a pair of scales was placed on the table by her at mealtimes and her allowance of food weighed out.

At the same time she began to realize that she was increasingly the butt of snobbish remarks and jokes on the part of Manila’s social elite. ‘Old’ society, in particular, made satirical remarks about her
habit of handing out identical little bottles of Jean Patou’s ‘Joy’ to Congressmen’s wives. She must also have known there were plenty of disparaging rumours circulating about her husband, too; but maybe she assumed that, as a man and as someone older, richer and more powerful than she was, his position made him feel invulnerable enough to ignore them. She herself was cut to the quick. She had, after all, lately been part of high society in Tacloban and here she was being made to feel like a parvenu straight off the ferry.

She began having severe migraine headaches for the first time in her life, alternating with bouts of lassitude and comfort-eating when Ferdinand was safely out of the house. She would lock the bedroom door and spend the day in bed, listening to soap operas on the radio and gorging on sweets. The double vision which her headaches produced began to acquire a metaphorical force—brought up to value honour, order, sobriety, manners and niceties, she could not abide the tumult and the disorder, the house that was not a home but a public arena.  

The crisis came towards the end of the decade with a full-blown nervous breakdown. One night Imelda lay as though dead, ‘cold, pale, motionless and hardly breathing’. Alarmed, Ferdinand took her to New York for three months where she saw a psychiatrist in the Presbyterian Hospital who diagnosed manic depression and told her that only she could get herself out of the state she was in. The cure, he said, lay in her changing her attitude: not merely to accept her new life but to embrace it completely, to revel in it, even if that entailed renouncing all sorts of preferences of her own. It seems that Ferdinand did offer to give up politics if she really wanted him to, but by then the doctor’s course of auto-suggestion (a sort of Couéism which in those days pretty much represented psychiatry’s sole armoury against mental illness of the non-chronic kind) seemed to be having an effect. To what must have been her husband’s profound relief she told him he mustn’t dream of doing such a thing. It was up to her to change, not him.

In a way this breakdown was Imelda’s revelation on the road to Damascus in that thereafter everything changed, although it is less certain in Imelda’s case whether the experience resulted in a more saintly person. It undoubtedly helped her come to terms with matters of money. Mrs Francisca’s mother recounted how, as godmother to the Marcoses’ first child, Imee, she had often visited the house in San Juan in those days, for she took seriously her role as the child’s spiritual guardian in a milieu that struck her as perilously worldly. On one occasion Imelda took her up to her bedroom and laid out all her jewellery for her inspection, saying, ‘You see, Amy, whenever I’m depressed I spread my jewels out on my bed; it cheers me up quickly.’ This was the person who within the next twenty-five years would amass what was estimated to be the world’s most valuable private collection of jewellery. On another day, rightly sensing that Mrs Francisca’s mother was wondering about the source of all this extraordinary wealth, Imelda said in a sudden burst of self-justification, ‘You’ve been secure all your life. You don’t know what it’s like to be insecure. You don’t know what it feels like to have toothache and not to be able to afford going to a dentist’.

Mrs Francisca published her book in 1988; Kerima Polotan wrote hers in 1969, only a decade after Imelda had cured herself of her breakdown and when the Marcoses were riding high, just completing Ferdinand’s first presidential term of office. In those days the question of their wealth was not yet an issue biographers dared address (although it was much discussed by Manila’s chattering classes). Thus Kerima Polotan could see the First Lady (as Imelda liked to be called) in a less complicated or contaminated light, more as the good wife who had overcome personal difficulties the better to be a model consort:

Having accepted the terms of her kind of life, she never again flinched or took a step backward. Explaining it afterwards, she attempted a metaphor: ‘[I] was like a butterfly breaking out of its cocoon.’ The headaches stopped for ever, the vague pains disappeared, and the double vision fused to become a single, concentrated look on the possible heights her husband’s career might take.

If this sounds too glibly like a woman deciding to sacrifice herself for her man and finding the process liberating, we should remember not only when Mrs Polotan Tuvera wrote her book but the period she is describing. By the time Cory Aquino had succeeded the Marcoses and Mrs Francisca’s book was published, people had long been saying that Kerima Polotan’s had been propaganda, mere hagiography and whitewash; that after all both she
and her husband Johnny Tuvera had served Marcos – albeit most honourably – for years. But once again, this was to let vindictiveness get the better of a sense of history. The modern women's movement did not emerge in the United States until the 1960s; Manila in the 1950s was completely devoid of any such popular liberationist notions, just as it was devoid of reliable psychiatrists. (Here one must make an exception for certain of the essays by one of the very best post-war writers, Ariston Nakpil’s relative by marriage, Carmen Guerrero Nakpil. For their day, these were astoundingly advanced. Collected in one volume, *Woman Enough* (1963), they made a considerable impact; the essay on divorce, in particular, dated from the late forties and was in its way far more radical than much of the polemic the Women’s Liberation Movement was producing in the US long after *Woman Enough* was published. Eugene Burdick, co-author of *The Ugly American*, paid Mrs Nakpil the ultimate compliment by lifting her entire essay – ‘The Filipina Woman’, title and all, for a chapter in his book on Asia. He wisely died before he could be sued.) Such rare writing aside, the dominant ethos in Manila, so far as young middle-class mothers were concerned, was of stifling Spanish Catholic proprieties weirdly allied to the sort of American aspirations exemplified in Lucille Ball sitcoms: a world of feisty but ultimately submissive housewives with narrow waists and frilled aprons who coveted ‘miracle’ kitchens and were wonderful mothers to lovably freckled, tow-haired kids whose archetype was Jay North as Dennis the Menace. Mrs Polotan, these days a widow in her seventies, was of Imelda’s own generation or even slightly older. The description she gave of Imelda’s change of heart following her agonizing breakdown whitewashed nothing; it was simply of its time (Hers remains the best-written of all the Imelda books.)

Later writers such as Mrs Francia developed their own theories as to what had ‘really caused’ Imelda’s breakdown, the principal one being that she had been deeply disturbed ‘by the discovery that the position, and at least part of the wealth, of the man she had married had been ill-gotten’. In other words, she had been morally outraged and disillusioned as much as she was repelled by the lifestyle of the upwardly mobile politician she happened to have married. It is hard to know what to think about this so many years after the event, but it is a plausible enough theory. Certainly

the scene in the Marcos household, with its constant crowds and cook-outs and uncouth strangers wandering about with sacks of money (that is, when they were not cutting the upholstery of her new sofa by sitting down while wearing their *baloys*) must have contrasted strangely with the decorous scene in her eminent cousin’s house where she had until recently been living. Speaker of the House pro tempore, Danieling, was a practising politician of a very different and patrician kind.

I should like to propose a slightly different hypothesis, which is that part at least of Imelda Marcos’s upset was caused by the paradoxical discovery that her new position did not vindicate Imelda Romualdez to quite the extent she had supposed. Her husband’s ambitiousness, his manifest engagement in all sorts of ancillary business activities, some of which were clearly dubious, marked him out in Manila as a type. For all his wealth and growing power, he was revealed as indelibly provincial, the exemplar of rough-and-ready Ilocano politics of the variety she must have heard a lifetime of Romualdez origins openly disclaiming. Her own uncle Norberto, Vicente Orestes’ brother, was not only a politician himself but a scholar who had been a delegate at the 1935 Constitutional Convention and who wound up as a Supreme Court Justice. When he died in 1941 President Quezon called him ‘truly a great man’ while a Spanish language newspaper said, ‘A saint has died: a just man and a perfect gentleman.’ Her family, in short, were part of the old elite. It must suddenly have seemed to Imelda that the new life she had contracted with a man who was not by their definition a perfect gentleman was doomed to exclude her for ever from that particular kind of manly distinction. She may even have wondered whether before he died her father had guessed as much. Her ‘step up’, far from restoring her branch of the family to public esteem, looked like guaranteeing its enduring status as faintly parish.

If this is correct, her recovery was absolutely characteristic and iron-willed, though arguably only the most important in a long line of decisions (both before and after she married) that exemplified a determined, ‘go-for-broke’ spirit. If the snobs didn’t like it, they could lump it. And if they thought her husband shady then she could think of a way of rubbing their noses in it. For it does not quite do to place too much emphasis on a novelist’s ‘before and after’. Imelda, of innocence suddenly corrupted. Common sense, as
well as a sense of place and history, makes it obvious that she
cannot have been wholly innocent even in her Rose of Tacloban
days, if by 'innocent' one means ignorant of the ways of the world.
She must shrewdly have observed first-hand all there was to know
about accommodation, even corruption. Apart from her own
family's dominant position in Leyte's politics (and provincial
politics were seldom conducted even with Manila's pretense of
decorum, tending towards dirty tricks, pay-offs, and not infre-
frequently murder), she had watched her father and the rest of
Tacloban's inhabitants adjust to living under the Japanese occu-
pation. She would have known the scams by which certain Leyteños
had profited from the Japanese, just as she would people who profi-
ted by the presence of the GIs she later sang to. No doubt a few
nice girls from Tacloban's convent schools had opted for dollars
and romance over penurious virtue. The stakes had always been
clear. Apart from which there was an old tradition that stemmed as
much from Asia as from Spain, that one could lose one's heart in
romance provided one did not lose one's head. A good marriage
need not necessarily imply a grand passion. I do not believe a girl
of Imelda's intelligence and readiness was innocent of such know-
ledge; any Kansulay teenager today knows as much. Yet that does
not mean that acting on it might not cause all kinds of stress. Any
optimistic youngster might experience sadness on perceiving the
essential starkness of the deal.

Susie Abadillo, who accompanied Imelda at her PWU [Philippine
Women's University] voice lessons, asked her, right after her
marriage to Marcos, if she had loved this man deeply enough to
marry him after a brisk 11-day courtship. She merely shrugged
her shoulders enigmatically and said, 'Well ...' 18

By the time I met Mrs Marcos, of course, her story of a great
romance had become immodably fossilized. Everything, from the
beribboned bronze bust of her late husband in the apartment to her
affectionate and even reverential references to him, made it clear
that the status of their mutual love was non-negotiable. Not only
was it a historical given, so was the yin-yang (Imelda's own
phrase) nature of their political functioning together: 'It was like a
sex act all the time, a love act. He thought of it, I implemented it.' 19

The first requirement for a career in politics in the Philippines is
money, and as we have seen Ferdinand had evidently taken care to
lay the foundations of his future presidency sometime during the
Second World War. The second requirement is contacts; and per-
haps the most important of the contacts Ferdinand made soon after
the war, that with the CIA, is the subject of this chapter. The impli-
cation of long-term planning on his part was often singled out in
the negative biographies of the late 1980s as proof that there had
always been something scheming about the man. He had been 'plotting' to become President right after the war, from before the
war, from student days at UP, from boyhood up ... Care was taken
in describing the Marcos career retrospectively so that the terms
used did not infringe those much-prized, Horatio Alger qualities
like ambition or determination. Instead, Ferdinand was described
as having been 'single-minded' (always a suspicious thing to be,
with its overtones of narrow fanaticism); he was 'wily' rather than
clever; he had not aspired to become President but conspired. Nor
had he ever planned anything; he had always plotted.
The truth was more unexceptional. There is nothing unusual about
a bright and ambitious university graduate boasting to his
close friends that one day he will be President, although when a
former fellow student and comrade like Leonilo Ocampo recalls
this today it sounds uncannily like prophecy. Furthermore, when a

Communists, nationalists
and America's Boy
Filipino with a Law degree was ambitious in those days it virtually presupposed a career in politics. A country about to become independent offered a young man excellent opportunities for preferment as well as the prospect of having a hand in the making of a new society (and how ironic that sounds after Marcos's New Society!). What is more, anyone entering politics anywhere harbours a wistful dream of getting to the top, of becoming President or Prime Minister, even if their realistic selves know better. Given the political system of his day, then, there was nothing about Ferdinand's rise to power that was particularly extraordinary. He played the same system as did everyone else; he simply did it better than most, perhaps more ruthlessly, making some astute connections and having a lot of luck on the way. Still, thanks to his strange war and what he must have known about the skeletons in the cupboards of most of the members of the post-war Philippine government, he had an ace up his sleeve that many of his potential rivals did not have: the United States.

In 1950 a fortyish politician named Ramon Magaysay, who had only been appointed as President Quirino's Defence Secretary mere two months earlier, oversaw a superbly planned operation of military intelligence that resulted in the arrest of the Communist Party of the Philippines' entire Manila-based politburo. Newly elected to Congress, Ferdinand watched shrewdly. When in due course Magaysay succeeded Quirino as President and managed to be popular simultaneously with the Filipino grass roots as 'a country boy' and with Washington as 'America's boy', Marcos must have become doubly attentive. He knew that the CIA's Edward Lansdale (the Walt Disney of covert action), in Sterling Seagrave's felicitous phrase, had been responsible for Magaysay's appointment as Defence Minister. Thereafter, Ferdinand could see ever more clearly the American hands pulling on the strings of Filipino politics. He realized that, independent nation or no and free electoral system regardless, the Philippines would never in the foreseeable future have a President who did not first have Washington's approval and backing. From an ambitious politician's point of view it became a matter of discovering how to play both the nationalist card and the anti-Communist card. Ferdinand Marcos thought he knew how he could become America's boy.

We need to backtrack slightly in order to acquire a perspective on the significance of Communism to America. The United States had emerged from the Second World War as the most industrially powerful nation on earth. From a European viewpoint America had hardly won the war by herself, having joined the fray rather late; but she had been on the side that could not possibly have won without her. It is true she had taken her time to recognize the global pretensions of the Nazi threat in Europe, and had very nearly been too late to save beleaguered Britain. But once Pearl Harbor had been attacked and Japan had made alliance with Germany, America's involvement became inevitable and — given Hitler's foolishness in invading Russia — the long-term outcome was not much in doubt. Wars are often portrayed as struggles between God and the infidel, or good and evil, or right versus might, but seldom so plausibly as in the case of the Second World War. Insofar as the notion of 'evil' had much meaning left in it, Nazism as revealed by the death camps seemed to redefine it. Consequently the Allies, unlike most victors of major wars, had a good claim to have won the moral high ground as well. This claim had been severely — many still think irreparably — damaged by America's dropping not one but two nuclear bombs on Japan in quick succession. It was pragmatic: the war was ended; the world promptly split into new power blocs separated by an 'Iron Curtain', as Churchill described it.

The Allies' notion of having had right on their side in the struggle against the Axis powers now carried over to their Cold War stance against the USSR and her satellites. (When forty years later President Ronald Reagan referred to the 'Evil Empire' he really meant it.) The Cold War, as a strategic stand-off based on the doctrine of MAD (mutually assured destruction) was undeniably dangerous and nervy. As a European whose lifetime has encompassed the whole of the Cold War my private, largely adolescent, memory is of a military affair conducted for 'our' side by NATO, interspersed with famous incidents (the downing of Gary Powers' U-2 spy plane, the Cuba missile crisis) and stories of espionage and competitive weaponry.

What I do not recall, because nothing like it occurred in Europe, was anti-Communist hysteria, which seemed to be peculiar to the United States. Stalin had long since stopped being 'Uncle Joe' of the
war years and had been revealed as a genuine totalitarian monster, both brutal and sinister. The English writer George Orwell had satirized Communism generally in his 1945 novel Animal Farm, but by 1949 events in Soviet Russia had prompted him to the far more chilling predictions of Nineteen Eighty-Four. This later book embodied many of the phobias current throughout the Western bloc at that time, most particularly of police state suppression of democratic freedom so vividly exemplified in the real world by Stalin’s gulags and the rigid controls that beset every aspect of public and even private life in the USSR. (Faced with ‘crimes of opinion’, not only did ordinary Russians need to censor their own speech, but even faces in the same official photograph might change from one day to the next.) If at public level in Western Europe such absurdities led to uneasy mockery, in NATO’s corridors a much grimmer attitude prevailed that sometimes came close to reflecting the paranoia of Stalin’s own state security apparatus. By the time Russia, and then China, exploded their own nuclear devices, there was unquestionably a genuine degree of psychosis on both sides in the Cold War. In the United States, anti-Communist sentiment toppled over into an outright witch-hunt. This had loud echoes in the Philippines as well as profound long-term political consequences.

The high summer of this hunt is usually seen as falling in 1953-4 with the hearings chaired by Joseph McCarthy. The Republican senator from Wisconsin claimed to have lists of the names of State Department officials and even high-ranking US Army officers who ‘in reality’ were Communist infiltrators. After a lengthy and notorious series of televised hearings the charges remained unproven and McCarthy’s career collapsed with a Senate censure. The effect of this debacle was not to discredit anti-Communism so much as the Republican Party, since it had appeared too loud and unserious in the face of what was seen as a desperate menace. It is not easy today to think oneself back to the attitude of, for example, the founders of the MPA (Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals) in 1944 when they were opposing ‘not only Communism, but the New Deal, labour unions, and civil rights organizations at a time when others connected with those causes were pulling together for the war effort, postponing their differences for the duration’. The actor John Wayne, who eventually became the MPA’s president, looked back in an interview to those days as having been a time when ‘Roosevelt was giving the world Communism’. (This was the same FDR whose heroic determination to come to Britain’s aid had finally prevailed over a widespread opinion that events in Europe were none of America’s business.) A future US President, the film actor Ronald Reagan, also played a considerable role in that period of Hollywood ‘purges’ and gave information regularly enough to the FBI to merit an informer’s code number: I-10.

Between 1946 and 1948 such attitudes were central toHUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee), which was Republican-led at a time when that party controlled the House of Representatives. The controversial lawyer Roy Cohn, who was described (after his death from AIDS) as ‘a native fascist, Joe McCarthy’s brains and the legal executioner of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg’ recalled the period vividly, since it was the making of his subsequent career.

HUAC was rampaging against everything American as apple pie, particularly the movie industry. Ten screenwriters, called The Hollywood Ten, had been cited for contempt and accused of fostering Russian propaganda in movies during the forties. President Truman denounced this stuff as a ‘witch-hunt’ and when HUAC (led by Richard Nixon) went after Alger His, Truman called it a ‘red herring’.

The point Cohn was making was that, contrary to the assertions of liberal historians, the Democrat Truman was just as rabidly anti-Communist as the Republicans of HUAC. In 1947 that President had written an executive order which instituted the first loyalty-security programme in US history, thereby allowing the FBI to probe the background and ‘Americanism’ of every government employee. The ability to see ‘Reds under the bed’ easily transcended party boundaries.

The Korean War between 1950 and 1953 was crucial to the hardening of the United States’ anti-Communist stance, not least because the outcome was so indecisive and seemed to Washington to be of unfinished business. (The war ended with matters standing largely as they had in 1948, with Korea still divided into
two – the Communist North and the democratic South – on either side of the 38th Parallel. The conflict was decisive only for the five million or so who died.) Although sixteen member nations of the recently formed United Nations sent troops, it was clear from the first that this was principally an American show, sanctified by the UN and militarily supported chiefly by the British. In the Philippines, President Quirino committed himself to sending an expeditionary force, the 10th Battalion Combat Team. The young Ninoy Aquino, still only a boy of seventeen, was sent to cover the war for the Manila Times. He began like all boys by seeing the war as an adventure, but within months believed himself to have aged ten years.

The premise for the UN’s intervention was when in June 1950, ‘in much the same way that, during the American Civil War, the Yankees of the North had crossed the Mason–Dixon Line to impose their kind of government on the Confederacy of the South and thus enforce the unity of the nation, the North Koreans crossed the 38th Parallel into South Korea and advanced as far south as Pusan.’ The UN troops were under the supreme command of none other than the ex-Field Marshal of the Philippines, General Douglas MacArthur, at the incredible age of seventy. At first the war went the UN’s way and by late October 1950 the Americans’ Eighth Army and X Corps had passed the North Korean capital, Pyongyang, and were pushing towards the Yalu River which formed the border with China. Soon they had bottled up the remains of the North Korean Army on the river’s southern bank. It all seemed over bar the shouting. MacArthur triumphantly predicted the Eighth Army would be home in time for Christmas, and the edge went off the US troops. This was just what Lin Piao had been waiting for; hidden in the mountains on the far side of the Yalu, Lin was the commander of China’s First Red Army Corps, the man who only the year before had been a decisive strategist in the defeat of the Guomindang’s Nationalist forces. China was about to take a hand in events.

The reverse, when it came, was as terrible a defeat for MacArthur as the Fall of Bataan had been. The Chinese forces fell on the Eighth Army and X Corps and drove them back down the length of North Korea with disastrous casualties. An article in Time magazine described the rout in hysterical terms:

The United States and its Allies stood on the abyss of disaster. The Chinese Communists, pouring across the Manchurian border in vast formations, had smashed the UN army. Caught in the desperate retreat were 140,000 American troops, the flower of the US army – about the whole effective army the US had. It was defeat – the worst defeat the United States had ever suffered. If this defeat were allowed to stand, it could mean the loss of Asia to Communism.

MacArthur blustered and branded the Chinese intervention as ‘criminal’, but T.R. Fehrenbach wrote later that it had been at least as legitimate as the US intervention had been in the first place. Just as the United States had not been able to stand idly by in June when a friendly dependency was overwhelmed, in October the men in Peiping (Beijing) and the Kremlin felt they could not permit the forcible separation of North Korea from their own sphere. MacArthur hinted clearly at the possibility of nuclear retaliation, while back home hawks such as Rep. L. Mendel Rivers of Charleston, S Carolina, called publicly for atomic weapons to be used against North Korea. Then on 1 December President Truman, who five years earlier had authorized the dropping of the nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, himself announced ‘we will if necessary use the atom bomb.’ Horrified, the British Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, flew the Atlantic to talk him out of so disastrous a move. ‘For the first time the UN cloaked that the United States Government had so expeditiously won for its action in Korea became not a support but a hindrance…’ After 1 December 1950, the allies who had tripped unquestioningly into Korea would never again allow the United States an unlimited credit card, moral or otherwise.

Thus faced with the threat of his own allies’ defection, Truman backed down. He vented his feelings by turning on MacArthur and stripping him of all his commands. A new allied offensive began again in January, once more crossing the 38th Parallel. But it had not advanced over halfway to Pyongyang when the Chinese countered with their spring offensive and overran the UN lines at Imjin. The Philippine battalion was in the thick of this fresh fighting, having been sent to help the hard-pressed British at ‘Gloster Hill’, which was held at the cost of severe casualties. Ninoy Aquino,
now eighteen and a veteran war correspondent, reported brilliantly from this engagement. Not long afterwards he left Korea when the war ground to a halt and turned from military stalemate to negotiations which dragged on until 1953. He was greeted as a hero back in Manila for his fearless coverage of the war, and in particular for his reports on the Philippine battalion. To help him recover, the Manila Times rewarded him with a roving commission which he used on an extensive grand tour of Southeast Asia.

Not surprisingly, Aquino left Korea convinced of China’s military might and tactical skill, which had come as a complete surprise to everybody, not least to General MacArthur. Consequently he started his journey in 1952 with his ears still ringing with the American forebodings à la Time magazine about the domino theory which foresaw Communism, unchecked, toppling state after state in Asia. Indeed, when visiting Vietnam, one of his early stops, he portentously noted ‘should this state fall into the hands of the Communists the Free World might as well write off Southeast Asia as LOST.’ By the end of his tour, though, he had substantially changed his mind:

[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 he had 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 nationalistic 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 Dutchman. To Asians, these people are the symbols of oppression. And many Asians would prefer Communism to Western oppression.’

The West—particularly the United States—made a crucial error by allowing the domino theory of Communism to obscure the nationalist realities being played out in the ex-colonies of Southeast Asia. The British spent heavily in terms of lives, money and political repercussions in order to suppress the Communist uprising in Malaya. Then in 1954 General Giap famously defeated the French army at Dien Bien Phu. Arguably the twentieth century’s greatest military tactician, Vo Nguyen Giap was later to mastermind the American defeat in Vietnam together with Ho Chi Minh. The strange thing is that from 1945 onwards the Office of Strategic Services’ files clearly revealed as much as anyone needed to know about these two men: how for thirty-four years Ho Chi Minh ‘had wandered the world as an exile seeking support for the independence of a country known centuries earlier as Vietnam’. The head of the US State Department’s Division of South-East Asian Affairs between 1945–7, Abbott Low Moffat, had been in Hanoi and knew Ho Chi Minh. He later testified to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, ‘I have never met an American, be he military, OSS, diplomat or journalist, who had ever met Ho Chi Minh and who did not reach the same belief: that Ho Chi Minh was first and foremost a Vietnamese nationalist.’ Giap was of the same mould. After the age of fourteen he had joined an anti-colonial party, was jailed by the French at eighteen, went underground at twenty-four after organizing student strikes, and at thirty-one was already a widower because his young wife had died in a French jail while serving a life sentence for ‘conspiracy’. None of this had much to do with the head, and everything to do with the heart. It was not Karl Marx whom the French, and later the Americans, were up against in Indochina but sheer grief and rage and an ancient patriotism. Even a twenty-year-old Filipino journalist could see as much in 1952. It was an extraordinary mistake for the West to have made, and doubly unforgivable in that they already had in their files all the evidence they needed to correct it. But that is how hysteria is. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this period for the ensuing decades of Philippine politics and the extent to which
those politics were crucially influenced by the American fear of Communism in Southeast Asia. In the first place the Philippines dutifully—if not slavishly—cloned HUAC and came up with CAFA (Committee on Anti-Filipino Activities) which bizarrely began its own Red-baiting and witch-hunting activities just at the moment when HUAC itself was discredited in the US. Its chairman, Martin Dies, jailed for fraud, and Senator McCarthy had been hounded back into the decent obscurity of Wisconsin.

Secondly, the Vietnam War, which effectively began fewer than ten years after the Korean War ended, seems in many respects like a re-run of Korea but on a far larger and more tragic scale. This time the Philippines was involved to an extent well beyond merely supplying the ‘Philcas’ non-combatant unit which Marcos sent in response to President Johnson’s urging. Vietnam, in fact, had a profound effect on domestic Philippine politics and on Marcos’s career, but in ways which only became fully apparent afterwards.

And thirdly, it is important to realize that the old colonial-era idea of Asia for the Asians—that of Rizal, Gandhi and Sun Yat Sen—was very far from dead, and there were plenty of Filipinos like Ninoy Aquino who found inspiration in it. ‘To the Asian,’ he wrote, ‘democracy and oppression are synonymous. Democracy in Asia is almost on the 13th step of the gallows.’ The irony was that in the next thirty years he was to become Marcos’s only plausible political rival, to be labelled as a Communist, to be jailed under martial law and finally topple down those thirteen steps onto the tarmac at Manila International Airport with a bullet in his brain, the victim of Marcos-era democacy.

What, then, was the nature of the Communist threat in the Philippines before 1950? The answer, with nearly half a century’s hindsight, is ‘negligible’, if by Communism is meant classical Marxist-Leninism dedicated to the overthrow of the state and capable of mustering enough popular backing to succeed. The CPP (Communist Party of the Philippines) was founded in 1930, and from then until the sixties drew the vast majority of its support from landless tenant farmers, chiefly those of Central Luzon. These were exactly the same people who formed the bulk of the Hukbalahap guerrilla resistance to the Japanese in 1942–5, and were very far from being atheist hotheads weaned on Muscovite dogma. They were for the most part devout Catholics, dirt-poor peasants who had inherited from their parents’ generation a profoundly patriotic sense that the ‘real’ revolution of 1898 (that of Andres Bonifacio, the true anak pambata or ‘son of sweat’) had still to be won. At the core of their motivation was the knowledge that they were still as landless, and hence as impotent, as they had been in the time of the Spanish. At the level of bare subsistence, remarkably little had changed for them. In 1969, the year of Marcos’s re-election as President, the writer Alfredo Saulo—who during the war had taken part in the Huks’ provisional government—had this to say about Communism in the Philippines:

The CPP is a unique and durable party. It has been outlawed twice, first in 1932 and again in 1957, but it has taken all this in its stride. It is extremely doubtful if the CPP can be legislated out of existence. All the important Communist leaders have been placed behind bars, but there is no doubt that Communism continues to win adherents, especially from the ranks of the alienated: people disenchanted and disgusted with unfulfilled promises of public officials, fed up with government graft and corruption, impatient with police inability to curb the rising crime wave, furious with the growing unemployment and the widening gap between the rich and poor, and, finally, distraught with the failure of priests and laity alike to live up to the teachings of Christianity.

This hardly sounds like a sinister organization controlled from abroad whose atheistic threat could bring about the collapse of either civilization itself or that of the Philippine dominion. The awful irony is that Saulo’s list of the sources of people’s alienation is still just as valid today, thirty years on. (It must be added that, like most of Bonifacio’s and Aguinaldo’s revolutionaries of 1898, Filipino Communists of the period were often better on strategies for seizing power than on giving detailed descriptions of what they would actually do with that power.)

Back in the thirties the first President of the Commonwealth, Manuel Quezon (who nowadays looks to have been as sane and statesmanlike as was possible in the circumstances), had recognized the origin of peasant unrest in Central Luzon and knew
perfectly well that some sort of land reform lay at the heart of any solution. He would go and cajole landowners to treat their farm workers better, then address peasant rallies in areas where there had been unrest and exhort them to patience. (I beseech you to have more patience! I ask you to desist from resorting to the worst — by burning the sugar-cane fields and harvesting the palay [rice] at your will and then seizing all, including that which does not belong to you. You must not do that! It takes time to help you improve your condition."

Shortly after this the war intervened and the more actively motivated of these peasants joined the Huk's. The land reform issue was shelved, effectively remaining unaddressed until 1954. In that year President Magsaysay passed his Agricultural Tenancy Act, which increased rice and corn tenants' share of the crop to 70 percent but otherwise achieved little. (In 1963 President Macapagal enacted proposals for a far more sweeping series of reforms that gave the government greater powers to expropriate landed estates. But the programme was hopelessly underfunded, and dawdled until Marcos himself initiated a genuine if uncompleted land reform programme that earned him a good deal of popularity at the grassroots level of Karsulay's folk.) At the end of the war the Huk's betrayal by the liberating American forces was nothing short of grotesque. American commanders, having used the Huk guerrillas to mop up the Japanese in Central Luzon while complimenting them on their organization and fighting skills, promptly turned around and ordered them disarmed. The Huk's could not believe their ears. Their leaders were rounded up by the same CIC (Counter Intelligence Corps) to which the brilliant agent Richard Sakanida had belonged. Part of the CIC's brief was to 'detect and investigate all matters pertaining to espionage, sabotage, treason, sedition, disaffection and subversive activity.' They arrested, jailed and interrogated men who, a few weeks earlier, had been their bravest allies, accusing them of being Communists and rebels. Their orders might not have come directly from MacArthur, but he no doubt applauded the motivation; his own wealthy patrician's horror of Communism was notorious.

The CPP had kept a low ideological profile during the war in order not to complicate the straightforward issue of organizing the Huk resistance. The Party's reaction to the Huk's sudden betrayal by its American allies — who to compound the insult were rearming and commissioning the very USAAFE guerrillas the Huk had disdained as 'tulsaffe' — was to form the PKM (Pambansang Kasulatan ng mga Magbubuhid, or National Peasants' Union) which absorbed nearly all those former Huk guerrillas who in civilian garb were ordinary landless sharecroppers. It was hardly a typically Communist act when the PKM urged its members to take part in the post-war democratic process and support the Democratic Alliance and Nacionalista parties in the 1946 elections. Six peasant-backed DA Congressmen were duly voted into Central Luzon seats, but the Liberal Party which won the election refused to allow them to take their seats in Congress and eventually had them disbarred on trumped-up charges of 'fraud and terrorism' at the polls. Nothing could have more stupidly guaranteed trouble. From that moment on, the peasants' faith and confidence in the democratic process evaporated. Despite President Roxas's hasty and inept attempts at pacification, agrarian unrest became more and more widespread in Central Luzon.

What finally drove the CPP out of reformism and into active struggle were the elections of 1949 in which Marcos first won a seat. These were widely acknowledged as the bloodiest and most corrupt in Philippine history. Hundreds of people were done to death in inventive, headline-grabbing ways. The CPP and the Huk's were obliged to support the candidacy of Senator Jose Laurel, ironically the ex-President of the wartime Second Republic whom MacArthur had later jailed in Japan for collaboration. This gave his rival, Vice-President Elpidio Quirino, all the excuse he needed to send in the military. Armed troops terrorized the polling stations, but even so Quirino only won by a small margin. The defeated Laurel angrily cried fraud. The entire election's grotesque nature so enraged the electorate that there were open demands for armed revolt. Laurel only called off his own plans for an uprising after a stern warning from the US Embassy. Quirino was clearly their 'boy' and Laurel might as well accept it with as good grace as he could muster. In 1950 the CPP leadership foolishly decided that a 'revolutionary situation' now existed, and formulated a two-year plan for seizing power. They were able to field some 15,000 guerrillas and believed they had at least another million sympathizers. As a show of strength and in the hopes of
winning over more peasants to their cause, several thousand Haks carried out damaging raids on towns all over Luzon. Some towns actually did fall into Huk control for several days at a stretch, but nothing was consolidated because nobody had worked out in advance what to do next. Another series of raids was planned for targets in Manila, but in the meantime the new Defense Secretary, Magsaysay, intervened. With the intelligence resources of Edward Lansdale's CIA as well as his own network of informers, he learned enough to carry out preemptive raids himself and arrest 105 Communist and Huk suspects, including the CPP's entire Politburo.

Such, in brief, is the story of how landless peasants were driven further and further into marginalization and finally into outright rebellion and subversion. Leaving aside questions of social justice, it does seem immensely stupid and recalcitrant of Presidents Roxas and Quirino to have allowed things to degenerate to this extent. Yet there was probably nothing men like that could have done. Themselves members of the elite, they were in the grip of a historical reluctance to side with anyone other than rich landowners and their own American "advisers." This was as much an ingrained social reaction as a conscious defense of business and property (so much of the Philippines' business was American owned). It was a pattern that would be repeated endlessly all over the "Free World" in the next decades, both elsewhere in Asia (Indonesia, for example) and in practically the whole of Latin and Central America.

Beneath it lay a kind of insane logic that grew out of the United States' hysteria about a global Communist conspiracy. According to this logic, it was easier to drive masses of marginalized peasants into the black-hatted ranks of 'international Communism' than it was to grant their elementary demands for a reasonable living. That way, none of the unpalatable and difficult social questions needed to be addressed and the issue simply became a crusade. That way, too, it could all be subsumed under the general heading of the Cold War. It became hugely profitable for American armaments industries which, in addition to supplying their domestic armed forces, were supplying those of a dozen or more 'friendly' foreign countries. This specialized economy lay at the heart of the rapidly growing 'military-industrial complex' which so alarmed President Eisenhower (himself, of course, a distinguished ex-soldier) that he took to referring to it in speeches in the late fifties and most notably in his Farewell Address in January 1961, warning that its rapidly growing power could reach the point when it, and not the President, determined the United States' foreign policy. His prophetic misgivings were amply confirmed within a few years as men, weapons and matériel were poured into South Vietnam in ever-increasing quantities after the CIA itself had concluded the war was probably unwinnable. Thus in the Philippines, the needs of America's domestic economy led in a straight line to numberless bloody encounters between the US-armed and -trained Philippine Constabulary and peasant guerrillas.

However, it would be naive and wrong to give the impression that the United States' strategy in Asia was based on a malevolent self-interest, that it was simply acting quite cynically to acquire a network of new colonies to satisfy the capitalists of Wall Street. This, of course, was the interpretation that Communists and Socialists favoured and which, by the time of serious student protests against the Vietnam war, even radical Americans found all too plausible. Such an interpretation did indeed seem obvious, but only if one ignored the status which Communism held in the American psyche. To successive US administrations Communism was not a joke or just one of those quaint foreign beliefs that a sophisticate might shrug off "as autre pays, autres mœurs." It was a virulent political and moral cancer that so threatened the world as to make necessary heroic surgery even if some of that surgery's local effects were regrettable. These 'local effects' in the Philippines, in Vietnam and in a dozen Latin American countries were frequently so abominable that it is hard to recount them without becoming polemical. One has to cling manfully to the idea that American intentions were never in origin wicked, and it is this alone that gives the subsequent events their status of genuine tragedy. Neil Sheehan, the Vietnam war correspondent who won the Pulitzer Prize for bringing the Pentagon Papers to light, gives a balanced reading of his country's strategic thinking:

The men who ran the American imperial system - men like Dean Acheson, who had been Truman's principal secretary of state, and the Dulles brothers in the Eisenhower administration, John Foster at the State Department and Allen at the CIA - were not
naive enough to think they could export democracy to every nation on earth. The United States had established democratic governments in occupied West Germany and Japan and in its former colony of the Philippines. If American statesmen saw a choice and high strategy did not rule otherwise, they favoured a democratic state or a reformist-minded dictatorship. Their high strategy was to organize the entire non-Communist world into a network of countries allied with or dependent on the United States. They wanted a tranquil array of nations protected by American military power, recognizing American leadership in international affairs, and integrated into an economic order where the dollar was the main currency of exchange and American business was pre-eminent.

The United States did not seek colonies as such. Having overt colonies was not acceptable to the American political conscience. Americans were convinced that their imperial system did not victimize foreign peoples—'Enlightened self-interest' was the sole national egoism to which Americans would admit. The fashionable political commentators of the day intended more than a mere harkening back to the imperial grandeur of Britain and Rome when they minted the term 'Faux Americana.' Americans perceived their order as a new and benevolent form of international guidance. It was thought to be neither exploitative, like the nineteenth-century-style colonialism of the European empires, nor destructive of personal freedom and other worthy human values, like the totalitarianism of the Soviet Union and China and their Communist allies. Instead of formal colonies, the United States sought local governments amenable to American wishes and, where possible, subject to indirect control from behind the scenes. Washington wanted native regimes that would act as surrogates for American power. The goal was to achieve the sway over allies and dependencies where every imperial nation needs to work its will in world affairs without the structure of old-fashioned colonialism.

One of the fatal flaws in this ambition is, of course, that it is quite impossible from a dependency's point of view to tell the difference between enlightened self-interest and old-style colonialism. It is also naive to foresee how, with the borrowed strength of this American imperium behind them, local elites would hasten to increase their own power and upset delicate social equilibria by pursuing ancient tribal agendas: all manner of revenge, landgrabbing and victimization. But an imperium does not bother itself with such native trivia—not, that is, until brought face to face with their untrivial consequences as the United States was in Vietnam. That war may be long over, but its fall-out of unrest continues to this day all over what used to be Indochina, and with particular virulence in Cambodia.

The Philippines was the obvious place in which to base efforts to win over Asia to the American fold after the Second World War. The United States had done at least two important deals with the Philippines in exchange for its long-promised independence: a trade pact (the Bell Act and the Parity Agreement that gave American businesses huge trading advantages) and the ninety-nine-year lease on twenty-three military bases on Philippine soil, including Clark Air Base and the immense naval dockyard of Subic Bay. These bases were not yet even nominally under the control of Filipino officers, and there was never the slightest question that the United States ran them, just as it ran the Philippines' military and intelligence services.

With all this in place and with the CIA's limitless support behind him, the charismatic Edward Lansdale took Magsaysay under his wing to show him how to break the Huks and the Communist menace. Together they made a remarkable team. With Lansdale's coaching Magsaysay did achieve some notable reforms. He reorganized the military and turned the Philippine Constabulary into a paramilitary service, firing the lazy and corrupt and promoting men with a sense of mission. Yet he also understood Lansdale's insistence that no matter how efficient the armed forces were, it would never be possible to win hearts and minds unless the men in uniform were firmly disciplined. Filipinos needed to break the distrust of centuries (like that for the old guardia civil, for instance) before they could look on the military as their allies rather than as the enemy.

The eminent good sense of the theory behind this reformism has lent Magsaysay's rule an air of radical achievement. It is largely for this that some older Filipinos still look back to his time with respect and a certain longing, as at a golden age when the old
American-Filipino alliance really worked and the anarchy left over from the end of the Second World War was at last brought under control. After all, by 1953 the Communist ‘insurgency’ had dwindled to practically nothing and the time when Huk guerrillas could take over entire towns was long gone. What could be a greater testament to Magsaysay’s bona fides and sincerity than the Huk supremo, Luis Taruc, coming down from the hills in voluntary surrender to the President? This particular incident was a tribute to Magsaysay’s quite genuine nationalism that existed independently of his usefulness to the United States. Magsaysay’s championing of agrarian reform reflected his conviction that things would never improve for ordinary Filipinos until they were liberated from that feudal and sterile cycle of oppression, armed struggle and more repression. Even so, to cite his nobler motivations is to side with the optimists. Others, including hard-headed people like Ferdinand Marcos, had very different memories of Magsaysay’s reign.

Among the things they remembered were the so-called ‘Nenita’ death squads organized by Colonel Napoleon Valeriano of the Philippine Constabulary. Valeriano’s ruthless efficiency confirmed Lansdale’s observations and the CIA man took a fatherly interest in this handsome young killer. Valeriano and Marcos went all the way back to high school, where they had been classmates. Like Ferdinand, he had been interned by the Japanese after the Fall of Bataan, but unlike his friend he had escaped from the camp. He managed to reach Australia and join up with MacArthur’s command, where he fell under the spell of the General’s rabid anti-Communism. Half a dozen years later his ‘Nenita’ squads specialized in meting out to suspected Communists the sort of memorable deaths calculated to encourage others to desert the ideological fold. With the Philippine Constabulary’s CIA-supported intelligence they terrorized much of Central Luzon and were frequently dispatched to other parts of the archipelago to pacify trouble-spots and instil some righteous fear. On Lansdale’s advice these death squads were upgraded to death battalions, trained by JUSMAG (Joint US Military Advisory Group) and given a virtually free hand to wage whatever war they felt like against whomever they wished. In Central Luzon, especially, Valeriano’s ‘Nenita’ battalions held peasants in the grip of a terror they had not known even under the Japanese. This was one prong of the Lansdale-Magsaysay strategy.

The other prong was image-building the Quiroirone regime for the benefit of all those outside the Philippines who knew nothing of terror in remote provinces. The CIA was determined to ensure that the 1951 congressional elections would not be a repeat of 1949, which had been widely seen as a complete travesty of the democratic process. This led to the importing of an early version of a professional spin-doctor in the person of a New York lawyer and PR man named Gabe Kaplan. Under the cover of such CIA fronts as the Asia Foundation, and aided by a team of young Filipino CIA recruits, Kaplan went round the nation’s Rotary Clubs preaching the absolute necessity for free and fair elections. Like Lansdale, he was a character straight out of a novel: a likely model for one of those sixties’ Ross Thomas heroes like Clinton Shartelle in The Searcher’s Whipsaw who were always being sent off by ‘Langley’ to some steamy country to ‘pull a shifty’ in the presidential election.

(Thomas had served in the Philippines during the war and retained a keen interest in the country, as his later novel Out on the Rim showed.) Certainly Kaplan was good at his job, and with the middle-class support he was building up all over the Philippines, Lansdale and the CIA set up NAMFREL (National Movement for Free Elections), the organization that was to play such a vital role in the snap election of 1986 and the ousting of the Marcoses. Colonel Valeriano himself was in command of one of the NAMFREL detachments sent to watch the polling in 1951. The outcome was, as intended, adjudged a masterpiece of democratic fair play and was prominently billed as such by the US press. The whole election with its appearance of scrupulousness had the equally calculated effect of winning over people of centrist and middle-class politics who had recently been wavering leftwards in sympathy for the Hukas and peasants on the receiving end of ‘Nenita’ tactics.

By 1953 the CIA-Magsaysay alliance was such that the outcome of the November presidential election was guaranteed. The Magsaysay-for-President Movement had been bolstered by the traditional official US blessing of laudatory articles in Time, Collier’s Magazine and Reader’s Digest about the one man who could maintain American-style democracy in the Philippines. Raul Manglapus (who went on to become Magsaysay’s Foreign Secretary and, more
than three decades later, Cory Aquino's too) composed a hugely popular 'Magsaysay Mambo' to whose catchy beat voters might dance to the polls. (It was to be resurrected as one of the anthems of the 1986 'EDSA Revolution.') The CIA, meanwhile, had a fallback position in case Quirino's liberals resorted to their 1949 tactics of murder and mayhem. They arranged for military compounds and radio stations throughout the country to be occupied by teams of Lansdale's Filipinos. In addition, a few days before polling began some US destroyers and a small aircraft carrier casually hove up over the horizon and dropped anchor in Manila Bay as a reminder of what might happen unless things went the way Lansdale had organized. It was pure Ross Thomas. Magsaysay won in a landslide.

The CIA's ability to ensure the election of their anointed candidate in a strategically vital ‘independent’ Asian country was impressive. More revealing, though, was the way they tailored their aims to coincide uncannily with those of the most powerful families in the country. The old ilustre class, for the most part, saw absolutely eye to eye with these new Americans, as so many of them had back in 1898. It was perfectly predictable that Lansdale, like MacArthur before him, should have used a Del Monte pineapple estate as one of the retreats where he formulated his various plans and carried out briefing sessions. One of the journalists who had been co-opted onto the Magsaysay campaign had been Ninoy Aquino himself, who was currently dating the Cuajangco family's daughter Corazon, whom he had known since they were both nine years old. (They married a year later in October 1954, the same year the Marcoses were wed.) Soon after the election Ninoy proposed to Magsaysay that he could do with a publicity boost to cement his victory and show that it had not been founded entirely on skilfully manipulated (and foreign-backed) hot air, as some cynics were suggesting. Aquino volunteered to track down the legendary Huk leader, Luis Taruc, and talk him into coming down from the hills. (Nor as well as the final straw for Taruc's remaining followers. (Nor was it so much harm to the enterprising young Ninoy's own fame and fortune.) Against all expectations, and greatly helped by his personal credentials as the man who had so courageously reported on the Philippine battalion in Korea and become an Asian nationalist, Ninoy made contact with Taruc. The Huk leader's dignified response to the proposition proved as nothing else that he was a Filipino to the core, a constitutionalist second, and a Communist a very long way third. 'I am a Filipino first and last,' he said, while admitting he hadn't supported Magsaysay's candidacy because he thought the man was 'dangerously inclined to the American imperialists.' But since the people had voted for him, no papal had to be respected. 'It is for us to accept their verdict.' After elaborate arrangements, Taruc agreed to surrender to Magsaysay. At the last moment, though, Ninoy's personal coup was thwarted when Colonel Valeriano popped up out of the undergrowth and arrested Taruc so that for publicity purposes this much-wanted man could be brought in by the Armed Forces of the Philippines instead of by a cocky young journalist Ninoy was understandably mortified. He went home, wrote his scoop and burst into tears. He need not have worried. Everybody of any consequence knew Taruc's surrender had been all his work.

If this interweaving of American post-war global strategy with Philippine domestic politics makes for a complicated story, it does explain how by 1953 it could have brought together such disparate characters as Edward Lansdale, Ramon Magsaysay, Napoleon Valeriano, Ferdinand Marcos and Ninoy Aquino. This is not to imply that a single conspiracy connected them, nor even that they necessarily liked one another. The unifying factor was the American cause, which was broad enough for each to maintain a private agenda on the side. Whatever else, it hints at a feature of Filipino society that remains as significant today as it was in 1953: the sheer interconnectedness of the comparatively small circle of oligarchs who ran - and still run - the Philippines. Through marriage, through contiguity of business and social interests and through the unspoken knowledge that they swim or sink together, they have everything in common.

It is quite possible that Marcos already knew Lansdale before Jose Laurel (who before the war had acquired Ferdinand of the Nalundasan murder) called in the debt and asked him to represent his old schoolmate Valeriano. This came about because of some temporary rejigging of alliances during the 1949 elections.
Valeriano had found himself in Negros Province trying to oppose Governor Rafael Lacson's private army. The Governor was using his forces to ensure victory for the Lopez-Quirino faction in his province, and Valeriano's men had agreed to a midnight meeting with an opponent of the Governor's. Unprepared for trouble, the Nenita squad was jumped by the Governor’s men and trounced. Although Valeriano himself was not in personal command of the squad, he was held responsible, considerably embarrassing the Nacionalista cause when he was charged with sedition. The Nacionalista party chief, Jose Laurel, called on Ferdinand Marcos to defend Valeriano against the charges. Marcos won the case. From that moment there is no question that Ferdinand had a first-hand link with Asia’s most powerful CIA officer. As we know, he had already been to Washington in 1947 to negotiate the veterans’ back-pay, and through his wartime alliances would have had serviceable contacts with both the Pentagon and the State Department. Adding the CIA to this would have made him a man with connections to the highest places in the US Government. In the next dozen or so years he took good care to cement these relationships and to ensure he put the right people in his debt. This led to his tacit endorsement as ‘America’s boy’ in the 1965 election. And that, in turn, produced an interesting dilemma for Marcos when President Lyndon Johnson called on him to send a token fighting force to help the US cause in Vietnam. The demands of Philippine nationalism required him to distance himself from all appearance of being the White House’s lap dog; on the other hand he owed his presidency at least indirectly to the White House and now these debts, too, were being called in. Apart from that, he was close to the two men who had probably done more than anyone else to shape the present strategic entity of South Vietnam: Edward Lansdale and Napoleon Valeriano. For this pair had gone on to greater things.

To describe Lansdale as a character out of a book was strictly correct. Well before the sixties Edward G. Lansdale had become a myth, having appeared in Graham Greene’s 1955 Saigon novel, The Quiet American, and then (perfunctorily disguised as “Edwin B. Hillandale”) in the best-selling novel The Ugly American. This last was essentially a political tract designed to convince Americans that they could wrest Asia from Communism if only they could find a way of getting Asians to co-operate. Asians were only superficially wily; they were highly susceptible through the Achilles’ heel of their hopeless superstitionness. To bend Asians to the American will, therefore, would require learning their local language well enough to convince the natives that Americans were essentially decent and their intentions honourable. This rapport could then be followed up with some harmless deception here and there, accompanied by judicious handouts of candy. Forty years on, the book still makes fascinating reading with the tragic retrospective light of Vietnam flickering across its pages. For in its study of Hillandale/Lansdale it emphasises precisely those ‘psy-war’ tactics that were the real man’s trademark. Having just helped Magaysay overcome Huk Communism in the Philippines and install Pax Americana in the form of a paragon of Asian democracy, Hillandale is posted to Sarigan (clearly Vietnam). He has a diploma from the ‘Chungking School of Occult Sciences’ — referred to now and then as the ‘Occult Sciences School’, whose initials ought to have struck any reader. Once in Sarigan he discerns how political decisions there depend to a large extent on augury and superstition. He uses his own skills in fortune-telling to convince the Prime Minister that he is the world’s greatest astrologer, duly influencing him in day-to-day decisions and thereby imperceptibly taking charge of the country’s political direction.

This, in essence, is what actually happened. As soon as Magaysay was safely installed in Malacañang, Lansdale returned to Washington to a hero’s welcome in acknowledgement of the mystique that now surrounded him. He was seen as having single-handedly turned back the tide of Communism in an Asian country and brought an ally firmly back into the fold. One down and a long list to go; but it was a splendid start. As the CIA’s expert on counter-terrorism and guerrilla warfare, Lansdale was next dispatched hurriedly to Vietnam in 1954 when the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu had set ‘alarm bells ringing all over Washington’, as he himself put it. Historians like Neil Sheehan believe that South Vietnam was really Lansdale’s own creation, since the action he took in his first two years in Saigon prevented Ho Chi Minh from following up the French collapse with a sweeping victory throughout the country. By any standards Lansdale was a remarkable man, extremely likeable and warm. (He is remembered fondly by a celebrated Filipino leftist and Marcos opponent who, as a child, lived...
near Lansdale’s compound in Quezon City. This man recalls Lansdale’s generosity with lemonade and the sort of American delicacies that brightened up the lean post-war years. Babe Ruths and all-day suckers.) Lansdale was also oddly free of Foggy Bottom theory and dogma in that he artlessly and sincerely believed that Communism was doomed in Asia as long as it was opposed by a mixture of counter-intelligence and enlightened government – dirty tricks and Babe Ruths, in other words. Once he had decided that America should back the Vietnamese Prime Minister, Ngo Dinh Diem, Lansdale flew to Manila and talked Magsaysay into letting him have Colonel Valeriano as his security adviser in Vietnam. In this way Valeriano began his international career as a killer.

Through Lansdale, Valeriano became a favourite of CIA covert operations specialists William Colby and Theodore Shackley, moved on from Saigon to train Shackley’s Cuban Brigade for the Bay of Pigs, then back to Indochina as chief ‘gook-zapper’ in Colby’s Operation Phoenix.  

(The Phoenix Programme was set up in 1969 in South Vietnam as an instrument of terror. ‘The programme in effect eliminated the cumbersome category of “civilian”; it gave the GV[N] [Government of (South) Vietnam], and initially the American troops as well, licence and justification for the arrest, torture or killing of anyone in the country, whether or not the person was carrying a gun.’ It was simply an extension of the old ‘Nenita’ tactics.) By then, what was seen as the magic formula Lansdale had invented and pioneered in the Philippines had become the CIA’s standard operating procedure elsewhere in the Third World – not merely in Vietnam but in Indonesia, Cuba and Chile. In each case the operations were carried out by the same team of Americans and Filipinos who had created Magsaysay.

Magsaysay’s identification with the CIA’s pragmatic approach to a global crusade that transcended mere national politics was shared by his successor, Carlos Garcia, despite Garcia’s famous ‘Filipino First Policy’ favouring Filipino business. In 1957 the ‘Permea’ rebellion against President Sukarno was under way in Indonesia. Sukarno’s increasingly virulent anti-Western stance was inevitably labelled ‘Red-leaning’, and a group of Indonesian colonels detected to the Philippines. Once there they sought refuge, and according to Ninoy Aquino President Garcia asked him if the exiles could be accommodated at the Hacienda Luisita, the huge estate in Tarlac which Ninoy’s in-laws, the Cojuangcues, had lately acquired. He arranged for the renegade Indonesians to have sanctuary there as well as a training camp for anti-Sukarno subversion (American arms were already being supplied from the Philippines to rebels in Indonesia). ‘We even set up an elaborate radio network so the colonels could contact their own people,’ Ninoy testified.

To look back now at this period from the century’s end is a deeply melancholy business, and all the more so because the collapse of ‘world Communism’ did not come about through the agency of a latter-day Lansdale. It was less that good triumphed than that evil fizzled. What strikes one about the great crusade, then, is its awesome waste. By 1969, when the war in Vietnam had become deeply unpopular in the United States itself, one answer to the question What was it all for? was supplied by the US Senate in an Armed Services Committee Report signed by Senators Stuart Symington, Stephen M. Young and Daniel K. Inouye:

The American people have lived with fears of a Soviet attack for some quarter of a century, ever since World War II, and have expended a thousand billion dollars on defence in recognition of this possible danger. These gigantic expenditures have been detrimental to many other plans, programs and policies which now also appear vitally important to the security and well-being of this Nation. The American people now know that many billions of these dollars spent on defence have been wasted.

Commenting on this document, the independent investigative reporter I. F. Stone wrote in I. F. Stone’s Weekly:

The truth is that we have spent a trillion dollars since World War II on a gigantic hoax. The US emerged from World War II, as from World War I, virtually unscathed, enormously enriched and – with the atom bomb – immeasurably more powerful than any nation on the earth had ever been. The notion that it was in
danger of attack from a devastated Soviet Union with 25 million war dead, a generation behind it in industrial development, was a wicked fantasy. But this myth has been the mainstay of the military and the war machine.  

It all seemed to confirm Eisenhower's gloomy forebodings about the autonomous nature of the military-industrial complex. Yet as little as eight years earlier, when Lansdale's highly secret stick-and-carrot attempts to win over Vietnam had not yet degenerated into full-scale war, the 'wicked fantasy' had probably not been that clear to anyone in the United States. In his recent memoir Gore Vidal, who once referred to himself with belligerent modesty as 'America's biographer', wrote that when he checked the notes he had taken in 1962 while hobnobbing with his old family acquaintance, John F. Kennedy, he was surprised to discover 'how little understanding any of us had of what was actually going on at the time':

We had been carefully conditioned to believe that the gallant, lonely USA was, on every side, beleaguered by the Soviet Union, a monolithic Omnipotence; we now know that they were weak and reactive while we were strong and provocative. Once Jack [JFK] had inherited the make-believe war against Communism in general and the Soviet in particular, he proceeded, unknown to all but a few, to change the rules of the game. He was about to turn Truman's pseudo-war into a real war. He was going to fight, somewhere, anywhere. Cuba had gone wrong. At Vienna, Laos had been marginalized as a place of no essential interest to us or to the Soviet. Yet in June and July of 1961, Jack had called for a $3.5 billion military appropriation to deal with what he termed the 'Berlin Crisis'.

Three months earlier, in Arthur Schlesinger's account, Kennedy 'saw [Soviet diplomat] Gromyko . . . took him to a bench in the Rose Garden, and observing that too many wars had arisen from miscalculation said that Moscow must not misjudge the American determination to stop aggression in Southeast Asia'. But as Mirsky and Stonefield pointed out, 'What Kennedy could never grasp was that the United States was playing the aggressive rol-
the Americans’ look-out. It was pure hypocrisy to meddle in another nation’s internal affairs while protesting benevolence, and then to complain when what they mistook for a loyal puppet turned around and bit them in the leg while dextrously removing their wallet.

All this goes to show that when his more judgemental biographers referred to Marcos as having ‘plotted his way to the presidency’, the image of Machiavellian cunning and unprincipled opportunism is the least interesting aspect of the story. By the year of his marriage, sheer chance, his own forensic skill and a foreign power’s global intentions had given him access to the centre of a stage on which, over the next thirty years, the fortunes of the whole of Asia would be played out. This was surely what Imelda Marcos meant when she was overheard in the mid-fifties saying of her husband ‘he is already a statesman, you know’, at a time when he was a mere Congressman. Thanks to his Washington connections, he was already thinking like a statesman.

This is not to deny that cunning and opportunism — even ruthlessness — played a part in his ascent, just as they inevitably would in anyone else’s winning the presidency of the Philippines. But his main ploy had been to make his own ambitions mesh with those of the United States. If the United States, as we have been assured, had the entirely praiseworthy and unwhining purpose of resisting the global spread of Communism, then Marcos can hardly be blamed for having supported this aim. Perhaps after all he did show a streak of political genius in never having been fooled by the granting of Philippine independence into thinking the United States would now withdraw from active interference with its former colony’s domestic politics, so long as they did not conflict with American business and strategic interests. It is likely, for instance, that President Quirino never understood why, after his despicable 1949 campaign, he was going to have to be dumped, that the United States had bigger fish to fry in Asia than keeping him in power after he had outlived his usefulness. It was precisely this that Marcos perceived. Far from being newly independent, the Philippines was about to become freshly dependent, this time for global strategic reasons. The US bases would become increasingly important. This was the new post-war realpolitik. Thereafter in his quest for the presidency, Marcos was artful in knowing how to play off this knowledge against the prevailing spirit of Asian nationalism. Of course he was seduced by his proximity to the real power of a man like Lansdale; anyone would have been who could feel the erotic charge that drives all politicians towards its source. Against this he had to balance the fact that in his innermost self he was still less America’s boy than he was an anak ti Batac, a son of Batac, a dissenting Ilongo brought up on stories of heroic patriotism. Eros was destined to win, as it generally does; but the struggle made for a lively and inventive career. When in 1957 President Quirino was killed in a plane crash with his reputation intact as the champion of the masses, Marcos would have known that with luck and pluck it was only a matter of time before he became the next ‘America’s boy’.