The Marcoses of Malacañang

While waiting to present his credentials to President Macapagal in Manila on 1 September 1963, the newly appointed British ambassador, John Addis, wrote one of his regular weekly letters home to his sister Robina. Then forty-nine, he was a career diplomat and China specialist who had spent the post-war years in Nanjing and Beijing. He was posted to Manila after two years as ambassador to Laos from 1960–2. One wonders how he felt about leaving the Asian mainland where his main interests lay. He was a fluent Chinese speaker and had got to grips with Lao, besides which his private passion was for Chinese porcelain, on which he was an authority. As it turned out, he was destined to remain ambassador in Manila until 1969 when, to round off his career, he was given the one posting he had always coveted: that of ambassador to Beijing (1970–4). Addis’s presence in Manila thus overlapped the transition from Macapagal’s presidency to that of Marcos, and he was there throughout Ferdinand’s first term of office. By that time he had acquired many emotional ties with the Philippines and went on maintaining cordial – if diplomatic – relations with Marcos until 1983, the year of Addis’s death. Long after he had been posted away, he kept visiting his friends in Manila and writing astute letters about the political scene there. From a historian’s point of view his occasional private conversations with Marcos – the last was in 1982 – provide some idea of the diplomatic world’s attitudes towards the President and his administration.

Sir John Mansfield Addis KCMG was very much a man of his class and time (born 1914, Rugby and Oxford). Neither he nor his sister Robina married. He wrote to her at their family home outside Tunbridge Wells informative, mildly witty letters whose tone seldom varied from an affectionate urbanity. ‘Dear Bina . . . love from John’ they went, week after week (at moments of excitement twice a week). They were a prolongation of the sort of Sunday letter home he would have been obliged to write when he was first sent off to boarding school, the dutifulness long since become a discipline and softened still further into a reassuring habit. They gave little away about the private John Addis: occasionally a light, mellow homesickness for Tunbridge Wells, nothing whatever about his own erotic affections. For those, one has to read between the lines or talk to people who remember him. For a description of his physical presence one can rely on the man himself, touchingly under few illusions:

I have seen myself on television. It was a shattering experience, and I had to go away after less than a minute. The long face and heavy head, quite bald except for some touches of white, the bad posture, and most odious of all the rich fruity voice, affectedly upper-class. Oh dear! Never again! People must love me very much for my inner qualities!

The letter he was writing to Robina in September 1963 contained the sharp observations of a travelled man with alert political and social antennae. Manila was still strange to him. So far, he had been unimpressed by the leafy and exclusive enclave of Forbes Park, which was full of grandees and his diplomatic kith and kin: ‘First impressions of the rich upper class are that they have exhausted all their natural appetites, bored, artificial, craving novelty.’ In those days his own house was safely far from Forbes Park (where the current residence is). It was downtown on Manila Bay, on the border between the old residential districts of Ermita and Malate which were classy in a quite different way. Even then there were still some aging Ermitenos who could recall the local Spanish dialect once peculiar to those few blocks bordering the bay. Addis’s house was
pretty and stood in a lovely garden with (again, in those days) a
view of the sea. If his first impressions of Manila’s elite had been
lukewarm, Addis was more enthusiastic about the ebullient free-
dom (many would say licence) of the national press.

One good thing that goes on here is the lively debate in the
newspapers on matters of current importance, often critical of
the Government. One of the issues discussed is the attendance of
the Filipinos at the ‘Games of the Newly Emerged Forces’
organized by Indonesia. One commentator urged the
Government to refuse to attend on the ground that attendance
would be a departure from the Government’s ‘hard anti-red line’
of no dealings with the Communists — i.e., they would be com-
promised politically by playing basketball against North
Vietnam or by racing against North Korea! I feel as baffled as I
would be in arguing about apartheid with a South African —
where does one begin when the gulf is so wide and there is no
visible point of contact? I feel a vague uneasiness over this ‘hard
line’ — hard lines which have no give may break suddenly. But
there are no signs of any cracks. The two political parties stand
for nothing except the organization of power and its benefits.
The labour unions, as in the US, are non-political welfare or-
izations. Even such issues as land reform and the Philippines’
relations with other Asian nations are not matters for political
debate. They seem a very immature, yet not yet emerged,
spiritually, from their colonial status, less aware even than the
Lao.  

Addis’s bafflement at Filipino/American attitudes to
Communism was, of course, very much a European’s reaction. In
addition, as a scholarly man who knew and loved China, he was
fascinated by that vast country’s painful political evolution as it
tried to reconstruct itself into a modern state. In 1947 he had been
First Secretary and Head of Chancery in Nanjing, the Nationalist
capital city so brutally sacked by the Japanese in 1937, and had
moved to Beijing in 1949 when Mao’s Communists took over. The
period in which he was now writing fell roughly midway between
the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution and was one
of intense ideological debate. Addis, though of course not himself
a Communist, watched avidly and sympathetically from Manila as
best he could.

His comment on the lack of newspaper debate concerning the
Philippines’ relations with the rest of Asia is odd, for he had arrived
at a tense political moment in this respect, and particularly from the
point of view of a British diplomat. The Philippines had an out-
standing territorial claim on North Borneo based on a historical
family link between the Sultan of Sulu (in the extreme south of the
archipelago) and the Sultan of Brunei. According to this the Sultan of
Brunei, back in the late seventeenth century, had either leased or
ceded North Borneo to his relative in Sulu, and the latter’s pre-
sumed — but highly doubtful — allegiance to the Spanish Filipinos
allegedly made this territory part of the modern Philippine Republic.

Until 1963 North Borneo was part of the remaining British Empire
then rapidly being dismantled. In that year it was renamed Sabah
and, together with Sarawak, incorporated into the new state of
Malaysia. This did not prevent the Philippines from prosecuting its
claim, however, and President Macapagal formed an unlikely
alliance with President Sukarno of Indonesia. Together they pro-
posed that, instead of the new country of Malaysia, a sort of
super-confederation of states should be formed. Comprising Malaya,
the Philippines and Indonesia, it was to be called ‘Maphilindo’. By
the time John Addis arrived in Manila this grandiose fantasy was
already beginning to founder, and Britain was seen as largely to
blame because it was siding quite unashamedly with Malaysia, its
former colony. This was not mere caprice on Britain’s part. The
formation of Malaysia presented an acute problem of demography.
With Singapore, but without Sabah and its Malay population, there
would have been a large overall Chinese majority in the new nation.

Britain was unwilling to grant independence to a union quite so
obviously foredoomed to racial unrest, so it took Malaysia’s part. His
country’s sudden unpopularity with Filipinos who supported the
Sabah claim was brought home to Addis when his residence was
picketed by furious protesters. As he wrote to Robina:

We now have photographs of the little demonstration outside
my gate the other evening. Two of the placards read ‘Britishers
we shall ax and hammer you’ and ‘White monkeys go home’. I
particularly treasure the latter.
A fortnight later he wrote:

There is a very puzzling political situation here, and I don’t see my way through it at all. Politically, the Philippine leaders are very immature. They have preferred not to leave the nursery in which the Americans brought them up. The President, Macapagal, has, I think, some inclinations to be a demagogue and an autocrat, though not the strength of personality of Soekarno. Most Filipinos [sic] assume so strongly that they belong to the West that it is a pleasing adventure for them, no more, to make a little excursion with fraternization with Asian neighbours – like the little rich boy who plays with the children in the street and finds it exciting just because he doesn’t belong to them and has the security of the mansion behind him. I think it was in this spirit that Macapagal entered into his flirtation with Soekarno, perhaps also envying Soekarno’s autocracy and certainly seeing his new role in Asian affairs as a valuable addition to his persona in international politics, which is what matters most to him. But I don’t think he has realized how far his behaviour over Malaysia has in fact committed him to his new friends and furthered their interests and separated him from his old position in the lap of the Americans. Until last week there was a chance that he would pull back before it was too late. But on Friday, with his full approval, the Foreign Secretary made a statement of policy which commits us further to the pro-Indonesian anti-Malaysian line. It was incidentally crude and clumsily anti-British. It is a measure of their immaturity and irresponsibility that when I went through the text of the foreign Secretary’s speech with him yesterday morning pointing out where it was untrue and unjust, his reaction was to laugh and say genially, ‘Yes, of course you’re right, it wasn’t so, don’t pay attention to that, this was just for internal consumption, to meet criticisms, it was just journalism; I feel there is nothing to get hold of. With General Phoumi I at least knew I was dealing with a snake...’

* 6 October 1965. General Phoumi Nosavan led the CIA-backed faction that seized control from the neutralist Laothian head of state, Prince Souvanna Phoumi, in order to achieve Washington’s policy of ‘polarization’. General Phoumi was frequently described by CIA officers as ‘our boy’

(A footnote to the Sabah claim – which is still alive today – is Imelda Marcos’s assertion that some years later Ferdinand offered the United States a base on Sabah for as long as they wanted, in exchange for their help in getting Sabah. 2 If so, Marcos may have intended renegotiating the open-ended status of this proposed lien on Filipino territory once the deal was safely in the bag. Yet by then the whole scheme was surely quite unrealistic.)

It is interesting to watch a middle-aged career diplomat settle somewhat wearily into a new posting, especially when he does not yet realize he will come to love the country deeply. By 10 November Addis had begun Tagalog lessons, which in those days must have been a rarity for any diplomat, especially an ambassador. He reported that ‘the mental effort is terrible’ after Chinese and Lao. Inevitably, his cultural comparisons were with those Asian countries he knew well and he found himself shocked by the living conditions of the poor in Manila and began an informal archive of newspaper cuttings of various horror stories he came across. He was particularly distressed by the tale of a poor mad mother of three children whose charred skeleton was found, still chained, in the remains of her house. (He was probably unaware that in 1912, referring to Spanish colonial times, an American doctor had reported: ‘There was no governmental provision for the insane, and it was a common sight to see these unfortunate tied to a stake under a house or in a yard with a dog-chain, and it often happened that during fires, which are so frequent in towns built of nipa, they were burned because no one thought to release them...’)

Addis’s judgement that the two main political parties of the day (Liberal and Nacionalistas) stood for nothing ‘except the organization of power and its benefits’ was not far wrong. This had an acute bearing on domestic political events that were unfolding in Manila beneath his eyes and which were about to take Ferdinand Marcos from being a Liberal Senate President to winning the presidency of the Philippines as a Nacionalista. Even before the 1961 presidential campaign Macapagal and Marcos, both Liberals, had come to a working verbal agreement. This was that in exchange for Ferdinand’s support and that of the Ilocano bloc (the so-called Solid North) which he could muster, Macapagal promised to limit his
presidency (if he won) to a single term of office and then in 1965 to throw his own weight behind Ferdinand's candidacy.

As early as 1964 Marcos was making it clear he had not forgotten this quid pro quo 'Of course I want to be President of the Philippines,' he told an interviewer. Yet it soon became obvious that Macapagal was going to renge on his promise and stand again. In a memorable political coup Marcos deserted the Liberals and joined the Nacionalistas as their Opposition candidate, and as such he subsequently fought and won the 1965 campaign. This 'defection' was something else his foreign biographers seized on later as evidence for a radical lack of principle on his part, for self-interested turncoatism. That was not only unjust, it was wrong. Once again it was an assessment made on the basis of a cultural misconception. The fact is that principle (in the sense of a party—ideology as opposed to an individual's sense of honour) is indeed rare in Filipino politics. The reason is not that Filipinos are inherently less honourable than anyone else, but because the political system they have inherited from their peculiar history of mongrel cultural influences does not depend on party loyalty in the way a European or even an American might understand it. Political parties in the Philippines are loose agglomerations of men and women interested in their own preferment. The party is seldom more than a convenient horse to carry a candidate on to personal glory. If it looks like weakening or becomes suddenly lame, the animal is swapped without more ado for one that looks sturdier. If this changeover takes place in mid-stream, so much the better for the delighted spectators.

This state of affairs is possible because so little Philippine politics is fought on the basis of a coherent platform of issues. It is far more about personalities, which is why so many showbiz people wind up in positions of power. (As of writing, the country's current Vice-President is Joseph 'Erap' Estrada, an ex-action-movie star.) If a candidate adopts a particular issue it will usually be because he or she thinks it will be a vote-winner rather than because it stems from a deeply held conviction. Much of the real emotion of an election campaign, and most of whatever wit or originality a candidate can muster, will go into assassinating the characters of the other candidates - even occasionally the candidates themselves. In this respect the model for the Filipino electoral process is more the American than the European style. It is not an electorate that would hold still for the lengthy disquisitions on ideology and policy that, for example, characterize a French campaign. In the local context, therefore, Ferdinand's swapping parties was not dishonourable. Quite the contrary: once he had seen that Macapagal was not going to honour his own promise he had little choice but to become the Opposition candidate. It was a gamble, of course. To desert the incumbent's majority party for that of the minority was obviously risky. He was no stranger to taking risks, but he was quite as shrewd as he was brave. His reckoning of his chances included the fact that the Nacionalista Speaker pro tempore of the House was now his cousin-by-marriage, Danieli Romualdez, the very man who had once escorted the Rose of Tacloban back to Manila from her penitent exile in wartime Leyte. Danieli was his bridge to the Opposition whose candidate he was about to become. Imelda was overjoyed. 'He has come home,' she said of her husband, implying that his being a Liberal had always been a bone of contention between them. At last he was part of her family in politics as well. She now threw all her energies into campaigning for him.

The 1965 presidential campaign was the first in the Philippines to rely on up-to-date techniques, especially radio and TV. In order for the Marcos camp to ensure the blanket coverage it wanted it was decided to recruit Fernando Lopez as Ferdinand's running mate. Lopez was a member of one of the most powerful families in the country: a typical oligarch of the kind Marcos would turn on and savage some years later. In 1965, though, he needed the exposure the Lopez family's nationwide TV and radio network could give him. Initially, all attempts to cajole Lopez into running for Vice-President failed. So Ferdinand sent Imelda.

Imelda did not rely on up-to-date techniques to get Lopez to change his mind. Just as she had years before in Mayor Lacson's office, she wept, she pleaded. And just as it had worked then, it worked now. Lopez agreed. Thereafter, Imelda Marcos became probably the hardest-working campaigner in any election in the nation's history. She had already gathered around her a nucleus of personal aides: twenty-five young women from the wealthiest families, all dressed in blue. They had started by being known as the 'Friends of Imelda' but they soon became famous as the 'Blue Ladies.' It was one of her private triumphs that she managed to
turn these elegant members of the seigneurial class into gofers who vied with each other for their favours and periodically smirched beneath her slights. The Rose of tacloban was on her way to recouping her pound of flesh and deciding that a mere pound wouldn’t quite cover the debt.

There was scarcely a town in the archipelago she did not visit in the company of hand-picked teams of these courtiers. She travelled by helicopter, by leaky boat, in jeeps bouncing over rutted tracks, even by ox cart. She gave the same speech twenty times a day. She shook hands until her own was numb; she kissed babies until her lips bled. And, of course, she sang. She sang herself hoarse. She took the trouble to learn songs in the appropriate dialect, and the locals were spellbound at the sight of this astounding glamorous apparition who seemed to have descended from another world, belting out Ilocano love songs or Waray ballads or Tagalog ditties. On one visit she passed close to Kansulay, and several villagers went to the rally. 'She was very... feminine,' said one judiciously towards the end of the Marcos era. She went on campaigning even when so exhausted she was barely conscious. Yet she always contrived to look radiant, as the press faithfully kept pointing out. Ferdinand had coached her well, but something else was taking over — something he had perhaps not bargained for: a natural politician’s instinct as well as a genuine warmth in her touch to which people responded. In many ways it was she who set the tone of the Marcos campaign, and there are still people who swear it was she who won him the presidency. (They say three 1’s won in 1965: Iglesia, Imelda and Ilocanos.) Nothing could better illustrate the distance she had come in the last half-dozen years or so since her nervous breakdown. She was a person who had found her métier.

Macapagal replied with jingles and slogans. Marcos followed suit. By present-day standards 'Forward the Filipino!' and 'Let this Nation be Great Again!' may seem anodyne enough, but at the time they struck a chord. And at least the sentiments expressed made the name of Ferdinand’s Nacionalista party sound plausible.

He had stolen a march by commissioning Hartzell Spence to write For Every Tear a Victory. Macapagal, dogged by bad luck (one of his authors died) came up very late with a biography of himself modestly called The Incorruptible. On the grounds that any publicity is good publicity Marcos seemed not to mind that Spence’s book was savaged by several critics. It had served its purpose.

In tune, the Spence book ‘offended and antagonized, was rude, (defaming) a people to glorify one man.’ It painted the Filipinos ‘smaller and blacker to make Marcos look bigger and whiter.’ Many were antagonized by its patently patronizing air, with Marcos praised not for being a ‘good Filipino’ but for being ‘almost like an American’ (In a candid moment, much later, Imelda would confess to a trauma induced by Spence’s book.)

The book was turned into a film, Igindihit ng Tadhana ['Fated by Destiny'], which was popular enough in the weepy tradition of Tagalog films to add up to 'at least 300,000 non-intellectual votes', as one estimate put it. The love scenes between the actors playing Ferdinand and Imelda were chaste and goopy, in conformity with popular taste, and probably did much to set a precedent for the couple’s recurring public protestations of love which made Filipinos feel like children overhearing their parents’ bedroom talk. Some were deeply reassured and touched; the more sophisticated reeled with nausea.

The campaign progressed inevitably into its dirty tricks phase. The Macapagal camp revived memories of the Nalundasan case by asking Filipinos if they wanted a murderer as president: ‘What else would be new?’ one newspaper replied tartly. Campaigners went around handing out black toothbrushes — a not unwitty reminder that Nalundasan had been shot while cleaning his teeth. The Marcos camp countered ‘The Incorruptible’ with allegations of corruption and sleaze and Macapagal’s links with Harry Stonehill. They also wondered loudly what Macapagal had done in the war that could match their man’s bemelled heroism. Imelda herself fell victim to a worse trauma even than that occasioned by Spence’s book. She discovered that a faked picture was being widely circulated with her head superimposed on the body of a luridious nude. She locked herself in her bedroom in San Juan, pulled down the blinds, and gave herself up to ‘anger and pain’. But she recovered by recalling that the Liberal Party had to be running scared if it needed to resort to such tactics. On election day she stayed in San Juan to vote while Ferdinand flew up to Laog to cast his ballot in
his home territory, the Solid North. He was piloted by a curious Swiss-Filipino industrialist, Hans Menzi, who would remain a faithful and increasingly powerful Marcos loyalist until his death. It so happened that some relatives of Imelda’s had once tried to pair her off with Menzi, an idea that would have caused hilarity in knowing circles. Menzi and John Addis were already friends and would relax from the cares of office by cruising the seaport at sundown in Addis’s ambassadorial Rolls.

As must be clear by now, anyone becoming President of the Philippines would need the full approval of the United States. Ever since the convention at which Ferdinand topped the ballot and was nominated as the Nacionalistas’ presidential candidate, he had had the backing of the CIA’s machine. He of course had his own influential connections; but in any case Jaime Ferrer, the Lansdale protégé who had helped set up NAMFREL for the 1951 congressional elections and had made sure of Magsaysay’s victory in 1953, had independently thrown his weight behind Marcos from the moment it was clear he could run, and had conveyed this choice to the US Embassy in Manila in person.

Many on the Marcos campaign team were old Lansdale men. One of them was Jose Aspiras, an Ilocano from La Union and former president of the National Press Club, who headed the Marcos press campaign. Rafael Salas, a professorial-looking bachelor of thirty-seven, one-time head of the National Economic Council, served as the campaign co-ordinator and legal counsel. He had been president of Lansdale’s National Student Movement when it launched Magsaysay’s presidential bid in 1953. Blas Ople, Ferdinand’s propaganda chief, was a former newspaperman and assistant to Magsaysay. Jose Cristol was a CIA-trained secret policeman who joined the Marcos team to gather political intelligence. He had been chief of Magsaysay’s bogus land reform programme intended to undercut the Huls. The Agency’s fingerprints were everywhere.

Once again the hallmark of CIA backing was the official imprint of laudatory coverage in the American press for the anointed. Dozens of articles about Marcos were published in the United States, nearly all of which drew heavily on Spence’s recent biography. This was the first time that a wider international public became acquainted with him, and they knew him from the start in that book’s histrionic version. The myth was not for denting for at least the next decade, and at the level of White House rhetoric it was still intact twenty years on. In 1965 there could have been no doubt in any American reader’s mind who the blue-eyed boy was in the forthcoming election in the Philippines. It was anyway widely rumoured that the US State Department was no longer happy with Macapagal who, himself infuriated by Foggy Bottom, had changed the day on which the Philippines celebrated its independence from 4 July (the same as the United States’) to the more meaningful 12 June (12 June 1898 being the day on which General Aguinaldo had proclaimed Philippine independence from Spain from his balcony in Kawit). Washington never forgave Macapagal; and it is probable that he was the first Filipino President never to be invited to the US. It arguably remains his one act as President for which he is fondly remembered by his countrymen, but it was nothing like enough to win him a second term of office. (This is not to suggest that his presidency was particularly dishonourable. Indeed, it could be argued that of all Filipino Presidents, Macapagal had the clearest idea of what he wanted to do when he first arrived in Malacañang. He at least had a plan, which was basically the doctoral thesis he wrote at the University of Santo Tomas rejigged as a five-year socio-economic programme. But it was all too academic, too inflexible, and its failure only made him the more stubborn.)

In the event Marcos won by nearly three-quarters of a million votes. ‘I never had any doubts,” remarked an exhausted Imelda, even though the uncountable sacks of money that had constantly arrived at their San Juan campaign headquarters must have greatly bolstered her natural confidence. She then went and stood in front of the mirror in her bedroom and began practising a variety of stiff salutes and casual waves. She was watched curiously by the new Vice-President’s niece, Presy Lopez. ‘How does she do it?’ Imelda wondered aloud. ‘How does the Queen of England wave?’

By the time of her husband’s inauguration she had perfected a suitably regal gesture. The parade was a grand affair. The White House was represented by Vice-President Hubert Humphrey. The
CIA's 'chief gook-zapper', Ferdinand's friend and ex-client Napoleon Valeriano, trotted along on horseback. By then the Marcoses had taken up residence in Malacañang Palace and the first signs of the Camelot-on-the-Pasig it would become were already evident. Yet there was still a certain innocence in the glitzy sheenagans. Nothing yet prefigured the vulgarity of the victory celebrations in Luneta Park for Marcos's 1969 re-election, when massed choirs sang the Hallelujah Chorus and people swapped horrified glances at the menacing phrase 'And he shall reign for ever and ever' Ferdinand's inaugural speech strove for the Churchillian note: 'Come, then, let us march together toward the dream of greatness... Even the press and Manila's sophisticates who could see beyond the filmic aspects of the new First Couple's glamour and who understood the political realities behind their victory were prepared to be faintly impressed as the hero called for heroes to match him:

The Filipino has lost his soul and his courage. Our people have come to the point of despair. Justice and security are as myths. Our government is gripped in the iron hand of venality, its treasury is barren, its resources are wasted, its civil service slothful and indifferent. Not one hero alone do I ask, but many.

There was cautious optimism among the less cynical. During the campaign, the issue of the US bases had been raised once more, chiefly because of the American Embassy's mishandling of an allegation that two Filipinos had tried to bomb a school on Clark Air Base. Since over thirty Filipinos had already died around the perimeters of American bases in incidents mostly involving ragged scavengers and jittery guards, it was an emotional issue. Marcos had made appropriately nationalist noises. While nobody seriously believed he would, or could, do anything radical about the Americans' presence on Philippine soil (the bases agreement still had over seventy-five of its ninety-nine years to run), there were hopes that this dashing and youthful politician whose valour had been so widely touted might yet have both the courage and skill at last to plot a more independent course for his country.

It would be a mistake to read Marcos's victory in the election as proof of his overwhelming popularity with the electorate as a whole. Leaving aside the Solid North, which would have backed a donkey provided it was an Ilocano donkey, much of the country probably did think he presented a plausibly dynamic image, while his beautiful and charismatic wife's glamour and warmth would have tilted the balance of tens of thousands of waveringers. But in Manila, in areas of cultural or ideological dissent (the Muslim south and Central Luzon), and in generally well-informed and educated circles, there was a good deal of scepticism about Marcos. It was no secret that he was already a prodigiously rich man, and everyone knew perfectly well how politicians became prodigiously rich in the Philippines. There was a lot of gossip about his 'Mr Ten Percent' methods, as about his deep involvement with Harry Stonehill. His CIA connections - and especially his closeness to Valeriano - were also common knowledge. It all added up to a picture of someone who was just a little too much the complete Filipino politician for comfort. Nothing succeeded like success, and so on; but there definitely were widespread misgivings among the intelligentsia about Marcos becoming President. Contemporary newspaper and magazine articles provide ample evidence of this to counter the picture his propagandists later airbrushed into a glowing retrospective portrait of popular acclaim and trust. It is inherent in the Filipino electoral system that a village like Kawit can be presented as having overwhelmingly backed a particular candidate when all that has happened is that voters have been given fifty pesos to put their cross against that name on the ballot, and the presence of muscular men with bulges in their hip pockets has suggested that it would be foolish to do otherwise. To try to infer an electorate's sentiments from such a voting system is as much bogus psychology as the system itself is sham democracy.

It was now 1966. The build-up of American troops in South Vietnam was proceeding at a hectic rate. By June the previous year there were 75,000 US military there; the Pentagon was foreseeing a total of half a million by 1967. President Lyndon Johnson's long and agonizing battle for public credibility over the non-existent war in Vietnam (war never was officially declared) was already lost; if a speech by the TV anchorman Walter Cronkite was anything to go by:
The political lie has become a way of bureaucratic life. It has been called by the more genteel name of 'news management'. I say here now, let's call it what it is - lying. 10

Vice-President Humphrey had come to Manila for Marcos's inauguration saying 'The tide of battle has turned'. This was the year LBJ was to call on Congress for $9 billion more in military spending on the war. It was an extraordinary spectacle: the world's most massive and sophisticated war machine ranged against a young nation peopled largely by villagers who were simply Vietnamese versions of Kansulay's. Yet this aggressive campaign was somehow still perceived by the US administration as being primarily defensive. There was no shred of irony on his part when the US Joint Chief of Staff's former chairman, General Nathan Twining, said that same year:

Red China under its present leadership seems to me at this writing to be practically a hopeless case. Naked force seems to be the only logic which the leadership of that unfortunate nation can comprehend... 11

It was China's thought rather than any 'naked force' that was about to have a considerable effect on Filipino politics and, indeed, on Marcos's future, although at the time nobody knew it. Even as the Cultural Revolution began to hit the world's headlines with stories of the Red Guards' excesses, few realized at least part of its ideology would strike a chord in peasant societies the world over, and not least in the Philippines. The British writer James Kirkup, passing through Manila in this period, singled out the Manila Times columnist J V Cruz (former President Magaysay's press secretary and destined to become a Marcos ambassador to Great Britain) for his courage in praising Felix Greene's book about China, A Curtain of Ignorance. Cruz also warmly recommended Greene's Awakened China: The Country Americans Don't Know. 'In the American-dominated Philippines,' Kirkup remarked, 'it takes guts to write such things.' 12 It is a vivid reminder of the climate of public discourse in the Philippines that it actually required courage to review favourably a scholarly book about the huge and ancient nation on the Philippines' very doorstep.

At the least, Cruz's review would surely have gladdened John Addis, who continued to be depressed and angry at what seemed to him a wilful lack of understanding in Whitehall and Washington of Chinese history and China's current motives. He had been Ambassador in Vienna at a critical moment for Laos, watching sadly as the CIA's 'polarization' doctrine (which had been launched with President Eisenhower's blessing) destroyed Prince Souvanna's delicately balanced neutrality in order for his feudal people to be labelled as either Communists or non-Communists. (These were Lao and other tribes who mostly lived so remote from politics they had not even heard of Laos, let alone the United States. Without warning they suddenly found themselves herded off their land and into camps while bombs fell in a steady rain from B-52s on the archaeological splendour of the Plain of Jars.) As Ambassador, Addis had naturally known all about the CIA's backing of General Phoumi's faction, just as he knew about China's own policy of strict neutrality towards Laos. The Chinese were in little position to meddle in foreign adventures: it was as much as they could do to feed themselves, reconstruct, and contain the ideological ferment that Chairman Mao was unleashing.

As the Vietnam war escalated and engulfed neighbouring countries, Addis clearly found himself at odds with official British policy, which was basically one of abstention for the US position. In 1967 he was to write gloomily to his sister about his suspicion that he would never now be offered a 'better' post than Manila (meaning, of course, Beijing).

I realize that my views on China and on Vietnam are not palatable in the Foreign Office. This has been made clear recently. I am not greatly concerned. I have a sense of duty, even of vocation, about the interests to be pursued and also about the time to speak out. I am set on a course, which I must follow, and which will continue to lead me on even if I do not get a new appointment after Manila... 13

At the time of James Kirkup's visit in early 1966 another Manila Times columnist, Alfredo Roces (the future author of Culture Shock! Philippines), was expressing deep misgivings about the war. The Vietnam war was beginning to spill over into the Philippines in the
form of battle-weary and often traumatized Gls on R & R rampaging through Manila, Okinawa and San Fernando. He then began to wonder if the war might not begin to involve the Philippines at a more sinister level. He asked exactly what Marcos’s election portended where the country’s relations with the United States were concerned: precisely the question that was on many intelligent Filipinos’ minds, only most lacked the courage or opportunity to put it into print:

Just what is the significance of the Marcos administration in Philippine-US relations? The first obvious point is that the Philippines under Marcos will shift to the right, bound and committed deeper towards the American sphere of influence. To our mind the indications that the Marcos administration will lean over backwards towards pro-Americanism are his choice of men, the fact that the sugar bloc is most vulnerable to US pressure, his statements of military commitment to Vietnam, and, lastly, the persistent shadow of the CIA — in Mindanao during the critical period of election tallying, and at the inauguration, according to our sources. There is also the presence (for the inauguration) of US Vice-President Humphrey, and the [de facto] conversion of Manila and other areas into a rest centre for the American Gls fighting in Vietnam.

Whatever the start of the Marcos era signified politically, it undoubtedly marked the creation of some potent public fantasies. If Ferdinand took office in the guise of a populist reformer, Imelda Marcos took up residence in Malacañang with cries of horror at the state of the place, a reaction that is almost de rigueur for the wives of heads of state the world over. It is at once a comment on their predecessors’s atrocious lack of taste and on the run-down nature of his regime. It serves notice that things are going to change, that fresh regime. It serves notice that things are going to change, that fresh

enough; far worse was the whole pervasive Third World aura of cockroach bait behind potted palms, door handles with one screwhole jammed with matchsticks, lights that wouldn’t work when it rained and grinning footmen crouching to stuff paper wedges under wobbling table-legs during state receptions.

Her immediate inspiration was probably Lady Bird Johnson, who had had her own ideas of what to do with the deserted set of Camelot she had inherited from the Kennedys Yet Jackie Kennedy’s own famous redecoration of the White House was undoubtedly a greater influence on her for its ethos. The idea of a Palace was what intrigued Imelda: part national showcase (Filipino craftsmanship and Filipino materials) in the carpet-and-chandelier areas to be seen by the world’s dignitaries, and part fantasy land in the private zones. The Marcoses’ version of The House Beautiful was every bit as metaphorical as Bunyan’s in Pilgrim’s Progress, though to somewhat different effect. Imelda took her cue from her husband:

As the President said, a government is like building a house and he told me he would build the structure, I was to take care of the refinements, the trimmings, the details — like curtains, for instance. What kind of people will live in the house? Cultured people, good people. So then the President said: ‘That is the house I would like to put up.’

In at least one respect she was unerring. She singled out a national characteristic that has always dogged the Philippines but was so obvious almost nobody even noticed it: the habit of thinking small and building temporarily. This was no doubt partly the reaction to constant termites and regular typhoons of a predominantly rural people constructing in wood. She ascribed it to her country having been colonized and subjected to so many changing regimes and wars (one has to remember it was still barely twenty years after Manila’s almost complete destruction in 1945). The effect on the people of this constant unsettling, she said, was disintegrating.

So much so that Filipinos say: So what? Tomorrow maybe this house will not be mine because some foreigner will come to these shores and take it. There’s no incentive, especially in the barrios
There they say: *Para qué?* What for? So what? It's a total attitude of 'It won't be there tomorrow so why bother?'

To have shown this level of awareness of how people in the barrios thought was most unusual then for a Filipina First Lady, a testament to all that unprecedented campaigning out in the sticks. It was also at least partly the impetus behind her grand building projects (concert halls, hospitals, a university, convention centres, palaces) that characterized her incumbency and which became derided as mere pathological symptoms of her 'Edifice complex'.

The Marcoses began their first term of office in an amazing burst of energy and with long lists of ambitious projects. One says 'their' advisedly. Although at this stage there was no doubt as to who was the President, Imelda's role was from the first portioned out as having complementary status to his. She had already drawn up a checklist of her own social projects. Among those which began to take shape were nutrition schemes, self-help projects, a nationwide home garden movement for using waste ground to grow vegetables, and an Integrated Social Welfare Programme which included the building of five welfare villages. Several of these replaced an appalling Manila sub-division called Welfareville which was a national disgrace. This was where many of the country's handicapped, orphans, delinquents, mentally ill and otherwise alienated and deprived citizens were herded in subhuman conditions. Voteless, they had never been on any politician's list of priorities. On new sites, often in the countryside surrounding the city, Imelda built brand-new institutions: a training school for delinquent boys, the Marillac Home for abused girls, 'Golden Acres' for the elderly. These were proper, even worthy, ventures for a First Lady; nor was it hard to see why someone with an artistic bent like hers might also have begun various civic beautification schemes. But ordinary people began to shed some of their scepticism when she tackled an unphotogenic obbligato like the mental hospital in Mandaluyong. The newspaper story about the charred and chained madwoman which had so upset John

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* The pun on 'Oedipus' is far clearer in Filipino pronunciation, with 'p' for 't'.

Addis faithfully reflected a mediaeval casualness on the part of the health authorities towards the mentally ill.

It must have taken courage for the erstwhile Rose of Tacloban not only to do something about the problem, but to visit the place in person— which she did, looking her usual fragrant self and wearing a restrained polka-dotted suit and sensible shoes.

What she saw was repulsive. The inhuman conditions at the mental hospital were a disgrace, reminiscent of slave labour camps. The patients were neglected and abandoned. Many of them were emaciated and disease-ridden. Most were in some degree of nakedness.

Most of the pavilions were filthy. The stench was unbearable. The patients were crowded into the pavilions like animals herded into a corral and left to endure the wretched conditions. Most of the wards did not have beds. The sick slept on the cold bare floor. Many of them became chronic tubercular patients. There were not enough knives and forks. Many ate like animals from rusty pails.

The booklet from which this description comes notes that Mrs Marcos made her own private investigations into the ineptitude and maladministration of the hospital officials, and took action immediately. There is a hint here of draconian measures being carried out behind the scenes. But while it was easy to sack and discipline individuals, it was another matter to change a culture's ingrained attitudes and habits. Still, such social projects were greatly to her credit. As to how zealously they were maintained is another issue, but many of them survive to this day although her connection with them is scrupulously suppressed. Senators' wives and actresses pitching for a political career drop by Boys Town and the home for the aged for their photo-op appearances, or go out to Muntinlupa to visit Marillac Hills, nowadays described as 'the Department of Social Welfare and Development's centre for abused children'; but with never a mention of Imelda Marcos. They will even pay a call on the mental hospital in Mandaluyong, these days quite salubrious and progressive, but nobody speaks of her long-overdue act of rescue that brought it into the twentieth century. Official discrediting leaves no Brownie points.
While Imelda was busy being motherly (as she put it), Ferdinand was occupied with the country’s infrastructure, organizing schemes for building roads, schools, hospitals, waterworks and the like, as well as drafting policies such as a new labor code and agricultural reforms. In his Manila Times article Alfredo Roces had cited Marcos’s ‘choice of men’ as evidence of his right-wing pro-Americanism. This may have been true, but it was also a fact that a reformer like Ferdinand had very little option when it came to picking a Cabinet. He didn’t want trapo types — the usual bench-warmers gladly rewarded for doing nothing. He needed technocrats, and the best young Filipino technocrats mostly had degrees from American universities. A compromise had also to be reached with older and respected figures whose names would lend credibility. This is how the historian O D. Corpuz described the circumstances surrounding the formation of Marcos’s first Cabinet:

During the 1964-5 campaign I worked with my group, Rafael Salas, Johnny Ponce [Enrile] and myself — we were my juniors at Harvard — on top strategy. That’s to say, we were working on what Marcos’s broad campaign should be rather than on the political relationships between us all as individuals. After the Election, when we’d all been successful, the first chance we had to meet we decided to make one last contribution and form his Cabinet for him. So we did, nominating only people we knew to be first-rate and spotless. [Carlos P] Romulo, [Alfonso] Calalan, [Clemente] Gatmaitan, Sr. etc. They were all appointed. We also nominated ourselves (except for Salas) as under-secretaries — you know, as a way of keeping in touch without onerous duties. For example, I chose to be Under-Secretary of Education Fine; except that we ought to have anticipated that because our chosen Cabinet members were mostly elderly, they were sooner or later going to retire or pass on and we ourselves would be stepping up into their posts as they left the scene... 

* A formulation that felicitously combines the first few letters of ‘traditional politician’ to make the Spanish word for ‘rag’, which has the same overtones as the English concept of ‘dirty linen’. The epithet suggests a private army, sordid mistresses, ill-gotten gains and dubious connections.

This was exactly what happened, and ‘O D’ duly became Marcos’s Education Minister, a post he held twice (with a resignation in the middle) until 1983 when he finally left to write The Roots of the Filipino Nation.

Corpuz’s group was not the only ‘think-tank’ to provide intellectual backing for Marcos’s presidency. In today’s climate of opinion, when the tendency is to dismiss him as simply one more of the world’s corrupt dictators, it is important to remember that from the beginning he had attracted honourable and intelligent people. He unquestionably did make foolish and scandalously appointments in his time, yet it remains one of the sadder aspects of his regime that right until the end he had some of the most talented and qualified people in the country working for him. Back in 1966, such ‘think-tank’ members were his core strategists. One such loose association of journalists, academics and artists was the Medis Group (named after the Medis building in Intramuros, where it met). This had started in 1964, when Ferdinand was still Senate President, with the express purpose of writing speeches for him and doing propaganda work for the forthcoming National Convention. The Group’s leader was Blas Ople (later to become Marcos’s best-known Labour Secretary and a senator). Other members included the journalist Adrian Cristobal, Amado Gat Insing (another future Labour Secretary), Romy V. Diaz (today Senator Ople’s chief-of-staff) and the noted artist ‘Malang’ (Mauro Malang Santos). ‘I think it was Ople’s idea. Macapagal was a great disappointment and Marcos was the only possible choice then. Can you imagine a President announcing “I am the best qualified intellectually for the Presidency”? That was Macapagal’s line. He’d easily beaten [his predecessor, President] Garcia, but he was still useless. The Group folded in 1969, I think, when our Government jobs became too demanding. Eventually everyone in the Group got appointed. This also explains how the steady stream of publications put out under Marcos’s name — of which he personally wrote scarcely a word — were often neither stupid nor badly written. In particular, those which provided a rationale for his declaration of martial law were argued by professional journalists like Adrian Cristobal and Florentino Dauz. Even today, well after the awful denouement, their polemics make plausible cases and fairly interesting reading, surviving as rather more than trash propaganda.
In early 1966 Marcos appointed Rafael Salas as Chairman of the Rice and Corn Producers' Council, briefed to make the country self-sufficient in basic grains. The new ‘miracle’ high-yield varieties of rice were just becoming available from IRRI, the International Rice Research Institute at Los Baños, outside Manila. Bypassing regional offices and using direct governmental intervention, Salas imposed technocratic methods that did in fact bring about self-sufficiency by the 1970s. It was an impressive turnaround. Simultaneously, Marcos introduced the most incisive measure towards general land reform yet enacted. This specifically concerned only rice and corn farmers. Critics said it was too limited, but actually it was a wise move because such land is the most heavily tenanted of all agricultural land. Marcos was highly enthusiastic about the scheme, personally involved. His original idea had been to let farmers pay a nominal rent for 15 years, and after that the land would revert to them. But it didn't happen.

It didn't happen partly because of difficulties with the Land Bank that had been set up expressly for the purpose, but mostly because Marcos came up against a predictable and perennial problem. Many of the Philippines' most powerful oligarchs were themselves landowners and they didn't want their estates sequestered, parcelled up and given away to their tenants, not even with compensation. Marcos, of course, was not himself from a landowning background - neither in a family nor in a regional sense - and it may be he simply misjudged the degree of opposition his policies would arouse. If so, he was naïve, especially since the landowners employed the very same legal delaying tactics of which he himself was such a master. But there was another aspect to it, which in the long run probably proved more dangerous to him than if he had reneged on his promises for agrarian reform altogether. For, once having started so radically and in such a blaze of publicity, he aroused greater hopes in the country's peasants than he or anyone else could possibly have fulfilled. This was true above all in the so-called 'Rice Bowl' of Central Luzon: the very territory which, since the days of the Huk, was the most radicalized of the entire archipelago. It was to backtrack badly on him, as he was to discover as the sixties wore on and the time of his re-election campaign approached. By then the increasingly vociferous opposition of the student and intellectual left, while undoubtedly influenced by similar movements throughout Europe and the United States protesting against the Vietnam war, in the Philippines also had roots in the discontent of small farmers and peasants in Central Luzon. It was an indication of the extent to which the Maoist theory of China's Cultural Revolution had caught the imagination of the youth of other Asian countries.

Even so, a good deal of the reforming legislation that Marcos enacted as President is on the books to this day, much of it still ahead of its time (given the context) and remarkably enlightened. The Labour Code, authored principally by Blas Ople, is not only still in force (with some minor amendments) but was considered by the UN's International Labour Organization as a model for the developing world. Likewise the 1975 laws governing fisheries remain progressive and sensible. This is one of the reasons why ageing technocrats often look back to the Marcos administration with a wistful mixture of pride and sadness. Not only had there been so much promise, but a great deal was actually achieved. That other things collapsed in scandal and disarray, eclipsing the achievements, was a tragedy of a kind and probably accounts for much of the anger still directed at Marcos's memory. The feeling is that had he not become weakened by moral blindness and illness, he could have been the greatest President the Philippines ever had.

Marcos cared deeply for the public interest. He had a real streak of idealism in him. He built the physical structure of our present development, there's no doubt about that. All the highways, bridges and electrification were his. In 1965 only ten percent of the Philippines had electricity. By 1986 eighty-five percent did. Lenin himself would have been proud of such an achievement. And it was all done at a time when we had very much less money than is available now.

In September 1966 Ferdinand and Imelda, the developing world's dynamic duo, flew to Washington for a state visit to the court of Lyndon Baines Johnson. According to Beatriz Francisca, Ferdinand had put his wife through a stiff preparatory course before they left, making her read 'the biographies of several key presidents, and especially of Johnson himself'. From the inestimable tedium of
this exercise she had gleaned two useful facts: LBJ’s favourite brand of scent and his fondness for the colour yellow. The research paid off. At their first White House dinner she wore a brilliant Texas-yellow terno (the formal Filipina dress with stiff, high sleeves) and periodically inhaled herself so that her perfume wafted enticingly across the American President’s plate. No doubt a drudge in the lower echelons of the White House’s protocol corps had been doing similar research and discovered that she had a notoriously sweet tooth, for lo! on the menu card was a special dessert named ‘Imelda’. In any case her feminine wiles worked only too well. After dinner LBJ had several dances with her, and then several more. Other revellers affected not to notice the huge Texan hands straying intimately over the yellow terno’s saucy features. When Ferdinand drifted by within earshot, Imelda said to him in Tagalog over LBJ’s shoulder: ‘I’m being groped by this guy, darling,’ to which her husband replied, also in Tagalog, ‘Ignore it, Meldy. It’s in a good cause.’ Life at the top.

The visit was a dazzling success. Its high point came when Ferdinand addressed a joint session of Congress in a speech brilliantly crafted to mesh with the Spence version of himself as war hero, which his audience would already have known. He gave a dramatic and solemn account of the death of an American GI just before the Fall of Bataan. ‘Yes, my American comrade died in my arms. We were surrounded and we had to break out. He fell and, as he tried to crawl to safety, I returned to him to fall at his side – Filipino and American blood commingling in Philippine soil.’

Commingling? To judge from the twenty-two occasions when he was obliged to stop for spontaneous applause, this terrible hokum went straight to Congress’s collective heart. There was not a dry eye in the house. Up in the gallery Imelda was weeping too and, when she was spotted, was herself given a three-minute standing ovation. She then went on to wow New York, singing ‘Strangers in the Night’ to Mayor John Lindsay in Manhattan, going to the Met in a white gown and diamond tiara with Lady Bird Johnson and being assured by Senator Jacob Javits that she had taken New York by storm. A Washington newspaper described Mrs Marcos as ‘a blessing not only to her country but to the world’.

Her husband, meanwhile, was doing equally well with a sheaf of speeches, addressing the National Press Club in Washington, the Philippine–American Chamber of Commerce in New York and the UN General Assembly. To read them now, more than thirty years later, is to be stunned by the ironies they contain. The senescent tone of statespeople’s speeches is in any case depressing since it irresistibly suggests to the global public that our lives are in the hands of people whose thought processes are probably every bit as banal as their self-expression. Yet often behind the ritual sententiousness are statements of ironic clarity. As Ferdinand told the National Press Club:

if democratic institutions cannot grow in the soil of under-development, then the Americans and the Vietnamese are fighting and dying for a hollow illusion in South Vietnam – in effect, an unattainable dream for the developing nations in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Then Americans are not fighting in Vietnam to keep open the option for liberty of the Vietnamese people, but for a mirage of their own making.

The anti-Communist stance of his own nation, he went on to explain, was rooted in its history; though where recent history was concerned he was evidently the victim of a discretionary attack of amnesia. The Colonel Landsales of the world of realpolitik might never have existed:

The Philippines is the first developing country in the whole world, to the best of my knowledge, that has overcome a full-fledged Communist rebellion without the aid of a single foreign soldier.

Vietnam, of course, was a major topic in all his speeches. Curiously, the one address he gave that may have most accurately reflected his own personal views was that to the Chamber of Commerce. Perhaps because it was aimed at businessmen it was the least bombastic, and he was more pungent than he had yet been about the US presence in Vietnam:

But to remain the leader nation of the Free World, the United States has neither the right nor the duty to maintain in Vietnam or anywhere else the posture of imperialist domination and control.
The last thing Americans should do is to give any impression that they are in Vietnam to pick up the fallen sceptre of French imperialism. They should make it absolutely crystal clear that they are in South Vietnam only to help the people defend their freedom; and that they will stay there only so long as their presence is needed and wanted. Only in this way can Americans avoid the odium that attaches to the conduct of any state that attempts to pursue at this late day the ancient goals of imperialism under a neo-colonialist disguise.

Given the number of fellow Asians in his audience, this was judiciously pitched. The Filipinos among them would certainly have picked up on the veiled hint that the Americans might not necessarily be wanted in places they had unilaterally decided were front-line zones in their global crusade. Unlike his other speeches, this revealed a Marcos suffering post-operatively, as it were, from some heroic feat of plastic surgery that had provided him with two faces: that of America’s Boy and that of the Asian Nationalist. He had already succumbed before the state visit to Johnson’s heavy insistence and had reluctantly been obliged to send a Filipino battalion to Vietnam. Unlike the one that went to Korea, however, it was (at least nominally) non-combatant. The Philag (Philippine Civic Action Group) was a unit of a mere 2,000 men, mostly engineers. It was rumoured that LBJ had been extremely disappointed and put out by Marcos’s refusal to send a fighting force, and Ferdinand must have needed to call on his considerable resources of plausible cajolery to resist the Texan’s pressure. What better way was there, LBJ had wanted to know, of showing that the Filipinos’ foxhole spirit — so movingly described by Marcos to Congress — was still flourishing, than by sending troops to new foxholes to fight in the crusade with their good American buddies? But the Philippine President had his domestic situation to consider. Grand verbal gestures in the UN General Assembly were all very well; back home it would have been political suicide for him after all the nationalist rhetoric of his election campaign to have sent Filipinos abroad to help fight Uncle Sam’s battles for him elsewhere in Asia. So he had held out for the Philag engineers and LBJ had to be content with fondling his wife at a White House function. Marcos had told Johnson that it would be far more efficient if the Philippines

sent money rather than men to Vietnam. Years later, Imelda added a footnote to this:

After the fall of Vietnam [Soviet Premier, Leonid] Brezhnev told me that if Ferdinand had sent a combat group to Vietnam as Johnson demanded it would have drawn us into total disaster. “As long as Marcos is President, we will never invade the Philippines!” Brezhnev said. Then Pham Van Dong [Hanoi’s Prime Minister] came here on his first visit abroad. I asked him, ‘Why did you choose the Philippines for your first mission?’ He answered, ‘Because we were so impressed by your husband offering to send money to Vietnam rather than combat troops.’

In any case the whole production of a weeping Congress and a President Johnson greeting Marcos as a war hero took place on a level of discourse that was pure fantasy. The sheer absurdity of the public posturing became evident years later. Sterling Seagrave, who had access to the relevant CIA documents, put it simply: President Johnson knew that the Marcos war record was a total sham, but endorsed it publicly to gain support for his Vietnam policy.

Overall, the trip was a huge success. Ferdinand had managed to talk LBJ into shortening the US lease on its Philippine bases from ninety-nine to twenty-five years, which greatly helped to appease his opponents at home. The quid pro quo was that the ‘Philag’ would be replaced by five new construction battalions for Vietnam, to equip which the US would pay $20 million. LBJ also leaned on the World Bank to open new lines of credit to Manila. Some knowing glances were exchanged when the Philippine Finance Secretary, Eduardo Romualdez (who happened to be Imelda’s cousin) announced that the Philippines was looking forward to receiving $125 million. Meanwhile, quieter things were afoot as more and more agreements were signed for the training of Filipino police as well as army officers at military schools like Fort Bragg and Fort Benning in the United States. Counter-insurgency, an issue never far from the minds of post-war Philippine presidents and their American advisers, was predicted to be a growth industry back in the archipelago’s expanding cities and still-extensive jungles. Also included was the deployment of Filipino CIA and
combat personnel in Vietnam, most of whom had been trained in the Huk-killing fields of Central Luzon and were skilled in the use of advanced interrogation techniques. The man who did most to institute these methods was Frank Walton, who had already retained the police in South Vietnam for a counter-insurgency role and who afterwards went on to reorganize the Shah of Iran’s secret police, SAVAK. Little of these dark manoeuvres showed on the surface; yet there were ‘as many as ten thousand counter-insurgency jobs in Indochina—under Walton’s guidance.’

Marcos’s first term of office poses several linked questions, none of which can be answered definitively—nor, rather, asking them yields nothing but conflicting opinions. The questions are: What really were his intentions when he became President? Was the necessary taint, without which he could never have come to power, decisively outweighed by his reformist, even patriotic, intentions for his country? In which case, precisely when did things begin to go wrong? Or, conversely, had he always considered the presidency as nothing more than an Ali Baba’s cave of loot to be cleaned out as efficiently as possible—which is what everyone asserted after 1966?

Many thoughtful people who had known and worked with him from the beginning of the ‘think-tank’ era when he was Senate President remain to this day convinced that his intentions began by being fairly honourable. He made it quite clear on numerous occasions, both public and private, that he wanted to be remembered as a great President, even the greatest of all—as the man who had finally turned around the Philippines’ chronic social and economic stagnation. ‘Marcos did have a vision,’ Senator Ople confirmed. ‘He was going to transform the Philippines into a modern state by industrialization. He was much agitated by the backwardness of the country regions. As an Ilocano, he was always jealous of the Tagalog regions, which were richer. He was extremely proud of the history of the Ilocos. He knew that in Manila the Tagalogs looked down on Ilocanos and he felt socially inferior.’

It is a mistake to share most incoming heads of state, that of radically transforming their country into a New Jerusalem of sweetness and light and plenty. History is littered with the empty names of these wishful endeavours which lie like last year’s cartridge cases around a huntsman’s abandoned hide. Lion Kingdoms, Great Republics, New Deals, Thousand-Year Reichs, Great Societies and—Ferdinand’s own— the New Society ceaselessly trodden down by their successors armed with the same powerful ambition and fresh hopes. These infantile fantasies of personal greatness are for the most part grotesquely at variance with the true wishes of electorates, who would happily settle for nothing more grandiose than affordable food, decent health and education services, telephones that worked and policemen who didn’t moonlight as members of kidnapping syndicates. Be that as it may, it is safe to assume that the triumphant reception Lyndon Johnson painstakingly laid on for the Marcoses in Washington would have fired both Presidents with appropriate dreams of greatness.

Where Imelda was concerned, it must have seemed there was now nothing she might not dare. What must it have been like for the ex-Rose of Tacloban, at the age of thirty-seven, to be escorted to the opera by the wife of the President of the United States and to be given a standing ovation by Congress? One effect would surely have been to endow her own fantasies with the one missing ingredient—omnipotence. Mrs. Gaffud renders down her aunt’s character with a succinct accuracy: ‘The world Imelda inhabited was a composite of the Visayan [Leyte] and Hispanic ways of life: a world of feasting and a dream of aristocratic grandeur.’ Anyone who had taken New York and Washington by storm, and had been fumigated by the American President into the bargain, had nothing to fear at home. Part of her, at least, was free to play the greedy queen to the point of funfett.

Her husband must have been left with more complex residues. On the one hand he, too, had had the treatment. But although it was calculated to turn anyone’s head a little, he was enough the professional politician to know that these accolades were both dis- cretionary and temporary. He did not need to be a student of history to grasp the concept of expediency. At the same time President Johnson, whose own dreams of social reform had not yet been broken by the sheer economic drain of the war in Vietnam, would have been lyrical—even piously so—at his ‘all-out war on poverty and hunger’ at home. LBJ’s vision of a Great Society was still undented. In 1966 he was able to boast about ‘the American economic miracle’ (as he did in his economic report to
Congress of that year) and be backed up by men like Sargent Shriver, Director of the Office of Economic Opportunity, who stated reassuringly: 'Our country is big enough to support a war in Vietnam and a successful war on poverty at home.\textsuperscript{36} This was the sort of hubris that seldom goes unpunished, and in due course the distant mirage of Johnson's Great Society thinned and disappeared. But in late 1966 Ferdinand would have flown back to Manila fired by LBJ's ambition to wage war on poverty and hunger, as well as by the American President's various earnestness of aid and support.

On another level, though, it may not be fanciful to imagine that despite the triumph, there would have been an aspect of Ferdinand that responded to LBJ with an increased passivity. Like all Filipinos of his generation, he had grown up with a self-image of subservience and deference where Americans were concerned. He might have gone to Washington as the President of the Philippines, but he knew he was massively outranked by this Texan who also physically towered over him. LBJ was notorious for using his size and macho aura to induce feelings of inferiority in other men. The unruly who were invited to spend informal time with the President often found themselves firmly invited to swim with him, only discovering too late that they were expected to swim naked, as he did. The reason for this became all too monstrously apparent as the President stripped off, leaving his shrinking guests to face a hopeless dilemma: Either they risked mocking remarks about only 'pantries' or 'pantywaists' wore swimming trunks, or they braved the tape-measure stare of those shrewdly dismissive eyes. One trusts that Ferdinand was never subjected to this ordeal; for although he himself cultivated a macho image (he had an athletic, even beautiful body in those days, beside which the naked LBJ would have looked like an ogre) and wore Brut after shave into the bargain, the fact was he was in no position to indulge in locker-room competitiveness.

But of course there were other ways than mere physical dominance for LBJ to ensure that Marcos knew exactly where he stood. The Filipino had, after all, grown up with the American missionaries' description of his people as 'little brown brothers' inherent in, and defining, the entire relationship between the two countries. The situation where an American President could with impunity run his hands over a Filipino President's wife in public was simply a logical extension of this relationship. It spoke well of the Marcoses — and, indeed, of the Filipino character — that they could make a joke of it in their own language right under LBJ's nose 'Never mind — it's in a good cause' is the Asian pragmatism that refuses to waste energy by taking offence. After all, Ferdinand had his revenge. LBJ was merely the first of four American Presidents he saw come and go while he held an unbroken office. He must have felt far more compromised by the way in which Johnson had made such enormous play with the story of his heroic war exploits. An actor himself, like all politicians, he would have perceived that LBJ also knew it was a stunt, yet at the same time a part of him must have come to believe it was true. The image had been over twenty years in the making; it had been written down for posterity in Spence's book; a presidential campaign had been successfully fought on the basis of its constant repetition. In some sense the story had actually happened. Now this account had been publicly endorsed by the American President. (It went on being believed almost to the end by Ronald Reagan. The wonderful irony is that Reagan himself was afflicted by an exactly similar inability to separate fantasy from actuality in his own stories of the Second World War. It was well known that Reagan had never left the United States during the war; yet on 29 November 1983 he told the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir that he had been given the task of filming the Nazi death camps for the US Signal Corps. The White House tied itself into semantic knots trying to wriggle out of this awesome gaffe.\textsuperscript{37} Marcos was by no means alone in being saddled with a mythic past.) And yet at any time they chose, the Americans could pull the rug out from under him. Not merely by exposing his war record, of course; that would be deeply embarrassing but not necessarily fatal. But it was a perpetual reminder of all those files buried away on the other side of the Pacific: OSS, CIA, CIC. They would contain some very detailed information about the past, about deals done and corners cut.

So he returned to Manila both glowing with triumph and freshly convinced that whatever else he wanted to do with his presidency, he needed to stay on the right side of Washington. At the very least he wanted to retain American support so that he could win a second term of office. If we allow Marcos his ideals, then, at what
point did things begin to go wrong? Those who assert that even his fancy to go down in history as a great President had always taken second place to ordinary greed would point to the documents which Cory Aquino's PCGG (Presidential Commission on Good Government) agents confiscated from the Marcoses' private quarters in Malacañang after they had fled in 1986. These revealed they had begun building up dollar accounts abroad under the names 'William Saunders' and 'Jane Ryan' as early as 1967. There were certainly Swiss accounts by 1968, with cash deposits of sums like $1.5m not unusual. So where was all this cash coming from that needed constant siphoning off abroad like a safety valve relieving pressure? One thinks all the time of that claim of Mrs Marcos's: 'By 1949 [i.e.] already had 4,000 tons of gold. Then in 1957 with the Bretton Woods Agreement, the US came off the gold standard and we bought another 3,000 tons at $35 per ounce. So at a time when the world total of gold was 17,000 tons, we had 7,000 of them.' What does this mean? Is it true, or is it 'true'? For one thing, it is plainly incorrect in certain details. The Bretton Woods Agreement was reached after a conference in 1944 at which the International Monetary Fund was established. But does this mistake of historical fact suggest the other figures are wrong? Maybe this story has the same status as that of Ferdinand's war as he related it to Hartnell Spence. Perhaps it is designed to reduce the hearer to utter credulity or to utter disbelief. Any further investigation is discouraged by a smokescreen of the improbable. (Even the current Central Bank Governor talks of 1,231 tons of 'missing Marcos gold'.)

The corruption of the Marcos presidency was being acknowledged within two years of Ferdinand's taking office. Even a foreign diplomat like John Addis commented on it, although with his usual weary sharpness he did put it into context:

I dined with the Macapagal on Thursday, the first time since he ceased to be President. They have built an enormous house overlooking a golf-course in the grandest area— with 'her money' of course. She was wearing large diamonds in her ears and in a ring, and even her daughter, much prettier now, had great pearls set in diamonds. And his administration was much less corrupt than the previous and present ones. Should the implications of all this invalidate any further claims for a Marcos idealism? The diary Ferdinand kept might be expected to throw some light on his true motivation, but unfortunately its precise standing remains a vexed problem. By his own family's account he wrote this more frequently than John Addis did his letters home. His son said he would usually write it in the evenings after dinner, and could often be heard chuckling evilly. When asked what he was laughing about, the President would say only that he was setting the record straight in a way that would one day bring extreme discomfort to his enemies (or words to that effect). He handwrote it, mostly on loose sheets of Palace stationery which built up into a substantial collection of boxes containing many thousands of pages. He often told his family and close aides that this diary was to be his true legacy: a blow-by-blow account of political realities that would form the centrepiece of the archive he would bequeath the nation. Accordingly, it was very precious to him, which makes it all the more surprising that when he left in a hurry for Hawaii in 1986 some of the boxes were reportedly abandoned and found only later in a dark corner of Malacañang. So far as one can tell, these fell into the hands of the PCGG. Meanwhile, US Customs impounded some, if not all, of the documents the Marcos family took with them into exile; but they must not have returned the diary since according to Bong Bong Marcos it has vanished and the family would dearly like it back. There is a version on CD-ROM which can be obtained with some difficulty, but the text is highly corrupt and has substantial gaps. (This may, however, be due to incompatibility with the Unix operating system that was apparently used for the huge archive.) In the first issue of *Smart File*, Ricardo Manapat (the author of the scholarly exposé of Marcos's 'crony capitalism, Some Are Smarter Than Others') gave an account that suggested he had the entire work, which started on 31 December 1969, and was intending to publish it in instalments in each issue of *Smart File*. What more, he quoted 'a foreign diplomat' who was shown the diaries in Hawaii and who commented favourably on Marcos's industriousness. Thus one is left with a clear impression that the entire text does exist. Given Mr Manapat's friendly connections with the National Intelligence Co-ordinating Agency, it seems highly likely that the Marcos diaries—assuming they are genuine—will have been sanitized along the way.
Americans and Filipinos so that anything truly embarrassing or revelatory remains suppressed. There is an outside possibility that what has been suppressed included entries that showed Ferdinand’s intentions to have been entirely honourable from start to finish. There is no question that the Manichaean dynamics of the 1986 ‘revolution’ demanded that the Marcoses should be allowed not a single redeeming feature, and it is conceivable (though not very likely) that the unedited diaries would have revealed a version of Ferdinand that flatly contradicted the image of a thieving and criminal dictator which so suited people’s purposes. As they stand, they convey an impression of someone with a watchful eye on posterity’s gaze: a man giving himself some careful dictation as he had once given it to Hartnell Spence. There are many entries whose assertions are later flatly contradicted by evidence that turned up in the wake of 1986—for example, those dealing with the Dovie Beams affair which we shall come to shortly. Apart from that, one takes the liberty to doubt the tone of such self-conscious loftiness as can be found as early as the second entry:

Yesterday I finally transferred all of my worldly possessions to the Filipino people through the Ferdinand E. Marcos Foundation. I have been planning this for many years but I felt that the beginning of my second term was the most propitious time. This was a decision arrived at after a long deliberation and was not the result of pique, anger, despair or emotions. Nor is it due to a sense of guilt because some of the funds came from the Yamashita treasure. Nor is it just a political stunt. And it seems a burden has been lifted from my shoulders. The surprising thing is that the reaction of people seems to be of no consequence to me. It was a noble act waiting to be done. I feel I am above all the pettiness of men and I look down on them with some contempt but with a counter-balance of understanding.

These are not the words or expressions of a man communing with a private diary (‘I have been planning this for many years’), but an exercise in image-building. It does make one suspect that no matter what may eventually come to light in US archives, it is unlikely to show this man in a radically different light. On the other hand, it would undoubtedly furnish some extremely interesting detail from which to make informed deductions. As his son remarked, ‘He knew all the gossip in town. At the dinner table the rest of us would be chattering away and he would be reading a book down at one end and now and again he’d look up when someone said something that caught his attention. Then he’d say, “For you it’s gossip; but for me it’s intelligence.”’ The complete Filipino politician.

As the Marcoses’ first term of office proceeded it was noticeable that Imelda began to acquire a considerable degree of autonomy. She, too, was the complete Filipina politician, not least in her remarkable ability to extract funds from people. This talent became abundantly apparent with her huge project to build the Cultural Centre of the Philippines on a stretch of newly reclaimed land on the foreshore of Manila Bay, not far from John Addis’s residence. She had successfully wheedled some money out of LB during the state visit but it was nothing like enough and she cast her net wider, generally cajoling and twisting arms until a cascade of money was wrung out. ‘I’m like Robin Hood,’ she observed, ‘I rob the rich. It’s not difficult; you just have to smile. You can terrify the rich, you see. The poor have nothing to lose.’ Mrs ‘King’ Kasiglah, her former music teacher, confirmed her extraordinary ability as a fund-raiser. ‘Whenever she needed funding for a major project she would call her friends. Imelda Marcos was our professional beggar.’

The Cultural Centre was in effect a large concert hall with a complex of administrative offices, built to a design by the Philippines’ most distinguished architect of the day, Leandro (‘Lindy’) Locsin. It was roundly criticized from the pouring of the first concrete for being a white elephant, an absurdity, a grotesque waste of precious resources in a Third World nation where people were dying of hunger and disease. It was also accused of being a Western-style temple for Western-style arts, an accusation many felt was validated when classical concert pianists like Van Cliburn and ballet dancers like Dame Margot Fonteyn came to perform at Imelda’s behest. Naturally, these charges carried a large component of self-righteousness and begged several questions. When exactly is a nation to be considered rich enough to be able to construct such a building without a blush? Are we really expected to believe that all Europe’s and America’s great public art buildings were only built
once all their hungry had been fed and their sick tended? The clear implication is that the only aspect of a nation worth worrying about is that of the purely material. As Dr Kasiglag suggested in an official report, the Philippines in those days was something of a cultural desert, at least in terms of public recognition of the arts:

In the early sixties the whole issue of art and culture had not yet entered into the public mind. The issue of total human development was an idea whose time had not yet come. The emergence of the Cultural Centre under the leadership of the First Lady focused public and national attention on the arts.

Nothing if not artistic herself, Imelda recognized from the start the crudeness of the assumption that the sole yardstick of a nation was its economy and material development. She had been aware of her own cultural insecurity even as she observed the deep effect she had produced by singing well-loved songs to audiences who ranged from Irving Berlin in person to Kalinina tribepeople on her campaign trail. This conviction of hers that everyone needed culture as much as they needed cash because 'the heart, too, knows starvation' was not a pose, and was made plain in the speech she gave at her Cultural Centre's opening:

'...Today, we too are people of courage and faith in the future. We are young and struggling to understand ourselves, trying to construct the noblest meaning of our race. Our greatest strength lies in being truly what we are: by nature and by grace, one people; by fortune and by fate, Filipinos. Yet so long as we know ourselves, we face the dangers that face the very young: a lack of soul, a vagueness of values. It is the purpose of this Centre to enrich the minds and spirit of our people and to foster among other people a true understanding of the Filipino self...'

Mrs Marcos's CCP remains to this day one of Asia's best auditoriums, with excellent seating and acoustics, while its programmes are carefully even-handed in their choice of Western and Filipino music, theatre and dance. There are times when the CCP seems the most unarguable of her various legacies to the country, and it is one of which any of the world's other First Ladies might be proud.

This is not to say that while its building progressed and she was exploring the thrilling bounds of her omnipotence Imelda was not also acquiring a reputation for arrogance and grandeur. As a foreign diplomat and friend of the Locsin family, Ambassador John Addis was often required to attend various functions of hers. One week he wrote despondently to his sister: 'On Friday I have to fly down to Tacloban for 3 days' celebration of the First Lady's birthday. My heart sinks... Six days later he followed this more cheerfully: 'To my immense relief the trip to Tacloban to celebrate the First Lady's birthday was cancelled because of press criticism. Several times a day I have been calling out aloud: "How glad I am that I am not there!" Three days of festivities in the company of my diplomatic colleagues would have been a terrible ordeal! (Never let it be thought that an ambassador's life is one of untrammelled, gracious ease.) Yesterday [with a stomach upset] I stood for 80 minutes while a bank was inaugurated and then after an hour more standing before dinner was served with shrimp-cocktail followed by poulet à la Kra. How does one survive?'

However, John Addis was from the start an admiring of Imelda Marcos's Cultural Centre, whose progress he followed keenly. Shortly before its opening he attended a concert at the Meralco Theatre out in Quezon City and, although he couldn't guess its outcome, he did catch a strong whiff of anti-Marcos political rivalry that in Ferdinand's next term was to have dire consequences for many of the 'oligarch' families, and in particular the Lopezes:

The concert a week ago needs some background explanation. Don Eugenio Lopez, a dry saltarian figure, is the head of one of the great sugar-growing families. He has extended into business and owns the Manila Electric Company [Meralco] which he has expanded from a lucrative utility company into a vast financial and holding company. He must be many times a millionaire but is said to be insatiable for even more power. Earlier this year he opened his new office block, which has a complete theatre at the back. This is in deliberate rivalry to the First Lady's Cultural Centre, which is to open this week. For Don Eugenio's opening he had over some stars from the Bolshoi Ballet, quite a good girl but three third-class men who could hardly move off the ground. To steal some of the First Lady's limelight, he had over, a week
before her opening, Beverley [sic] Sills, the new star of the New York Opera. Her first night was by invitation only—a glittering audience and I know so many of them now. As I walked through the glass doors of the entrance, there was a ‘Good evening, Mr Ambassador’ behind me—the Lascins, so we sat together. Beverley [sic] Sills is superb, one of the very great artists of all times 48

In these letters Addis does hint at various events which suggest that, somewhere in the political background, things were becoming seriously unglued after the initial honeymoon period of Marcos’s first term of office. Both he and Marcos were approaching the end of a period: Addis as Ambassador in Manila and Ferdinand as a first-term President. Addis’s comment that it was newspaper criticism that had caused the cancellation of Imelda’s birthday celebrations in 1967 indicated a growing opposition to her extravagant style, if not a personal unpopularity (although she was indeed strongly disliked in many quarters). The reference to the Lopez family’s Meralco Theatre having been planned as a deliberate rival to Imelda’s CCP shows how things had changed since the days when she had so brilliantly wooed Fernando Lopez as Marcos’s running mate in the 1965 election. By now, her husband had come to view the Lopez family as the prime exemplars of the oligarchs he was determined to crush just as soon as he could get himself re-elected. When Blas Ople remarked that Marcos, as an Ilocano, had been made to feel socially inferior in Manila, he was simply voicing the widely held theory that revenge played a large part in the Marcoses’ joint attack on the old-money upper class.

John Addis left Manila just at the moment when he sensed things were coming to a head. Unlike probably every other ambassador in Manila at the time, and always the China specialist, he had taken the trouble to go out personally into the wilds of Central Luzon to discover for himself the extent to which Mao Zedong thought had infiltrated the growing leftist opposition to Marcos. Earlier in the year he had already alluded to ‘demonstrations’ at the University of the Philippines, and he plainly saw trouble in store for whoever won the election (he was betting on Marcos). Despite his close ties and one particular private affection he had built up, John Addis gives the impression of a certain weariness:

It will be a relief when the elections are over. The politicians are campaigning 20 and more hours a day. Money is being poured out in millions. It is like a wild party and everyone will wake up with a headache... 49

Then, six days later:

Marcos has won, as I predicted. It is a good thing for the country to have broken at last out of the cycle of a 4-year Presidency which has done it so much harm. And Marcos is stronger and ableer than anyone else. For us there is the advantage that we do not have to make a new set of friends again, as I had to when the Macapagalists went, but can carry straight on. I am pleased. It would have broken the First Lady to have lost 50

Shortly after this, John Addis was posted home.