EDSA and after

For the first time since he had taken power in 1965, Marcos now had appreciable sections of the establishment ranged against him in opposition that was growing ever more organized. Depositions of elites found themselves on the same side as students who had done their stint in the hills with the NPA; teachers began tacitly, then openly, supporting their more militant pupils. The judiciary might still have belonged to Marcos, but he had lost the Church. In many ways this was the biggest blow of all for Malacañang. Cardinal Sin, the radical bishops and all manner of leftist liberation theologians now took over the ground at the centre of the Church, squeezing the First Couple’s old conservative elements out onto the ecclesiastical fringes. In this way the new centre carried with it many of the hitherto silent majority of the pious and respectable, who increasingly viewed political events as scenes in a morality play. The Manichaeism characterization of Malacañang as home to the forces of evil was under way.

The first sign that these new alliances could wield real political power came in the 1984 Congressional elections. A friend of Cardinal Sin’s, Jose Conception, reformed NAMFREL (National Citizens’ Movement for Free Elections) which, it will be remembered, had originally been set up by the CIA for the 1982 Congressional elections. The new NAMFREL could call out 300,000 seminarists, nuns and lay religious nationwide as poll-watchers to counteract COMELEC (Commission on Elections), which the President controlled. NAMFREL was thus a demonstration of the Church’s practical involvement in politics as guardian of the democratic process. Marcos won the election by two to one in the total number of seats, but only by the expedient of last-minute cheating in the provinces. Manila itself had been too closely watched by NAMFREL observers for wide-scale tampering with the calipal’s ballots. The left, meanwhile, had made a big effort (the same mistake it was to make more disastrously in the snap election of 1986) by calling for a boycott of the polls. Agapito (Buoy) Aquino, Ninoy’s younger brother, announced that participating in Marcos’s election would be ‘convincing at a foregone sham’; but the voters’ remarkably high turnout showed this strategy to be badly out of touch. It was as though the electorate had decided that the most telling way of opposing the President was by using his own tactics of constitutionalism and legality, but making sure they were properly policed. This, too, would give the US no excuse to intervene, whereas left-inspired rioting might provoke Washington to react if it appeared genuinely to threaten the Marcos administration. The point about Washington was that one never quite knew what it was thinking. The apparent split that seemed to have opened up between the Department of State and the White House on the question of Marcos’s future was no guarantee that ranks might not abruptly close if the external threat were real enough.

Yet the left’s anti-Marcos and anti-US stance did continue to attract a good number of middle-class liberals, intellectuals and even business people. Whenever the security forces went on the rampage against crowds of demonstrators, the left won new converts. Incidents like that on 20 September 1985, when twenty-seven protesters were gunned down in Escolta, northern Negros, only helped the left. Ferdinand, now constantly on and off oxygen and dialysis in the Palace’s intensive care unit, knew this perfectly well, and raged impatiently. It was yet another illustration of the limits of even a Filipino ‘strongman’s’ ability to control his own forces outside Manila. It showed how crude a dath’s chain of command really was; how anything that required delicacy or subtlety at state level could simply be annulled in the provinces by traditional head-hunters being loyal in the only way they understood. It was old-style politics caught with its cudgels raised by the cameras of a...
modern mass media. He could see this only too clearly, but there was little he could do now to alter the nature of the carefully organized structure that had guaranteed his incumbency for the past two decades.

The factors that were really to decide the President's fate were actually taking shape within his own armed forces. Ultimately, these were probably rooted in the long-standing rivalry between Fabian Ver and Fidel Ramos. Throughout most of the seventies and martial law, Marcos had kept Romeo Espino on as Chief-of-Staff in order to prevent the rift between Ver and Ramos from becoming glaring. Despite both men being his relatives, the two were poles apart in every way. Ver's entire career had been built on personal loyalty to Marcos rather than on professional military accomplishment. He was loyal in a way that gave rise to sundry jokes, the commonest being that if the President were to order Ver to jump out of one of the Palace windows the General would reply, 'Certainly, sir! Which floor?' He and the man he served had been together since the days when Ver had been young Senator Marcos's driver and adviser on military affairs. Since then, in his capacity as Ferdinand's chief security officer he had built up the Presidential Security Command into a private army of 6,000 men, all with the single task of protecting one man and his family.

Fidel Ramos's own career, by contrast, could scarcely have been more different. He was a career soldier, a West Point graduate who had served in both Korea and Vietnam. Marcos had appointed him chief of the paramilitary Philippine Constabulary before martial law, at a time when it was very much more powerful and widely feared than the Army. The Army's remit was merely that of national defence, hardly an onerous role given the US bases on Philippine soil and the mutual defence pact. The PC, on the other hand, was responsible for practically all the front-line skirmishing with Communist guerrillas and the MNLF rebels in Mindanao: vicious and demoralizing fighting in which heavy casualties but few prisoners were taken. Battle talismans were collected and cherished on both sides: scalps and ears and dried scrotums made into purses. On declaration of martial law the relative positions of the PC and the Army were swiftly reversed. The Army was expanded from 50,000 to over 200,000 men, making the PC suddenly look like a very poor cousin indeed. Practically overnight, Fidel Ramos found himself presiding over a lot of outdated equipment and battle-worn men. Yet he too was intensely loyal to his cousin, the President, and went on heading the PC as conscientiously and professionally as he could in the circumstances. He had a reputation for being incorruptible while at the same time knowing almost all there was to know about where the regime's bodies were buried (as how could he not, in his position? By the time of the 'EDSA Revolution' he would have been PC chief for sixteen years).

By 1981 Marcos realized that if he were finally to lift martial law he would need to improve the Army. The military had in many ways become quite slack since measures of public control such as curfews had made much of its job comparatively simple and routine. Now its morale and efficiency would need boosting. He retired General Espino, appointing Fabian Ver Chief-of-Staff and Fidel Ramos Vice-Chief. Among the reasons why Marcos passed over the militarily better-qualified Ramos for the top Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) post was the President's boundless cynicism about Washington, from whom he always expected the worst. To him, Ramos the West-Pointer with his excellent Pentagon connections, was their eyes and ears in the Philippines. In addition, Ver was to keep control of the Presidential Security Command (it later passed to his son Irwin) as well as of the vast intelligence network he had created. Unable to resist his old tendency to concentrate power, Marcos established a 'regional unified command structure' which put the Constabulary, armed forces, special forces and intelligence network all under Ver's ultimate command as a kind of private, warlord army. Watching this with the direst misgivings, Fidel Ramos the good soldier kept his head down and aired his opinions only to retired senior officers whose military brotherhood he could trust absolutely.

The ending of martial law also meant that the President had problems with his former martial law administrator, Juan Ponce Enrile, who was now left without a job. Enrile was, of course, a civilian: an ex-Harvard corporate lawyer by training, very sharp, with an ambitious and wily politician's instincts. These were what had made him so valuable as a strategist back in the 'think-tank' days of 1964-5 when he joined the already-formed group of people like Blas Ople, Joe Aspiras, O. D. Corpuz and Rafael Salas to plan the campaign that first took Marcos to Malacañang. Years later,
Ver's and the President's private army. Instead of being a fighting force with a long and honourable history of defending the country it had become subordinate to personal megalomaniac, and all with the connivance and support of a foreign power. The more the militarizing of the country and its policies had exposed the armed forces to the mockery and hatred of the Filipino people — who after martial law increasingly saw it as a tool which Marcos and his minions deployed against the very people it was designed to protect — the more the young officers' anger increased. Ninoy Aquino’s assassination was the last straw since almost everybody, including even the Agrava Commission, believed the military was deeply implicated in the murder. It was a dishonour that could no longer be borne. It should be remembered that these young officers were products of the Philippine Military Academy, which was modelled along the lines of US academies like West Point and turned out fiercely patriotic soldiers with a very keen sense of honour, probity and loyalty to each other. As far as they could see, almost everything they had been trained to respect had been systematically subverted or outraged by those in charge of the armed forces. Civilians were brutalized, while scars and wholesale corruption were endemic at every level of the military (the Army’s Logistics Command alone furnished examples of theft on an almost incredible scale).

It was out of this anger that the Reform the Armed Forces Movement (RAM) was born, centred to a large extent around the Military Academy’s Class of ’71. By the end of March 1985, eighty officers had issued a statement calling for loyalty to the Philippine Constitution rather than to one man, and the names of the Movement’s leaders became known: Lt.-Colonels Gregorio - ("Gringo") Honasan and Vic Batac; Colonels Red Kapurvan, Eugene Ocampo and Hector Tarazona; Captain Felix Turingan and Navy Captain Rex Robles. They were rumoured to have up to 1500 supporters of every rank in all three services. Marcos had, of course, followed RAM’s growing influence through Fabian Ver’s intelligence network. In April 1985 Ramos and Enrile persuaded him to meet RAM’s leaders and hear their complaints. He did; but once again it was a sign of his increasing weakness that nothing came of the meeting. He could no longer recognize grievance; he only saw disloyalty. Rex Robles and Gringo Honasan were both assistants to...
Enrile, which in turn brought Enrile under increasing suspicion. Ever since his de facto demotion, the Defence Minister had smoldered. Both he and Marcos seemed at a loss to know how to deal with each other. Too much dirty water had flowed under the bridge since the old days for easy accommodations. Enrile, Danding Cojuangco and even Jose Aspiras had been talked about as the President’s likeliest successors, but the factional split in Malacañang between Ferdinand’s Ilocanos and Imelda’s Warays had now become critically deep. The Ilocano bloc had decided that they must at all costs consolidate power. They had also taken the decision that in one way or another Imelda had to go — to be sent somewhere where she could do no harm. Ferdinand must himself have recognized how essential it was to solve this pressing politico-domestic conundrum, but it was beyond him. He was too dependent on Imelda and too ill. Lesser problems could be dealt with, however, and he had already taken the decision to replace Enrile as Minister of Defence with either Cojuangco or Aspiras, and maybe also to reinstate the post to its original position of having power over the AFP. The ailing President’s mind must often have been prey to thoughts of a Palace coup even as it was further worked on by Fabian Ver, who was no friend of Enrile’s. In the General’s view Enrile, although from the North-east (Cagayan), had never really been on the ‘Ilocano team’. He was by nature too much of a loner for Ver’s taste, even without the sinister and suggestive fact that his most trusted aide-de-camp and security officer was Gringo Honasan.

Ver and Marcos now drew up secret plans to have all the RAM plotters and their supporters arrested — including Enrile, who was so close to RAM that in the paranoid atmosphere of Malacañang it might have seemed that the passionate young officers and their supporters were beginning to constitute his own private army. By now, indeed, a little gang of RAM colonels was screening high-level AFP paperwork and were, in effect, running the Department of Defence. Also to be arrested were all sorts of civilian Oppositionists including Cory Aquino (around whom much of the anti-Marcos struggle had polarized), her advisers such as Cardinal Sin himself, and many other Church and lay leaders. Those nominated for arrest totaled more than 10,000. The idea was to imprison them on the Isla de Caballo in Manila Bay and keep them there. In retrospect, this plan arguably represents the nearest Ferdinand Marcos came to a kind of madness. Martial law was long past, how could a supposedly democratic President order the mass arrest and transportation of his entire Opposition, including large numbers of the Church and his own military? It is charitable to assume he was addled with illness and pharmaceuticals, his judgment further warped by Fabian Ver who, when under pressure, reverted naturally to the old-style Ilocano warlord his extraordinary powers had turned him into. Once again, these were the measures of another century being proposed for a political crisis in a late twentieth-century democracy, and as such they perhaps did have about them a small measure of pathos buried in the larger measure of pure lunacy.

Throughout 1985 a wide selection of US officials paid visits to Manila to evaluate for themselves the deteriorating situation. There was a broad consensus that the atmosphere in Malacañang was truly weird. The President was evidently sick and his regime as evidently beleaguered, besides being riven with factionalism and intrigue. The resemblance to the last days of a medieval court was becoming ever more marked, with a Shakespearean Act V in the offing. The aura of fantasy was scrupulously observed. The dinners and receptions went on as normal, Imelda’s disco on the top floor of the Palace fudged and flashed in the evenings, the technocrats and the cronies bustled in and out with briefcases. Though virtually imprisoned in Malacañang by his need to be within constant reach of the dialysis machine that kept him from lapsing into coma, Marcos was still looking forward to an indefinite future of uninterrupted power. Although his skepticism about the United States embraced the fickleness of US Congress, he seemed convinced that the highest levels in Washington would never withdraw their support. His reasoning can only be guessed at, but he must have imagined that his consolidated control over the entire state apparatus would always dissuade the US from making any move that could endanger their strategic and business assets in the Philippines. There were still a few years to go before Mikhail Gorbachev’s glasnost and perestroika foreshadowed the gradual collapse of Communism throughout the world, thereby radically altering the old balance of power and its strategic priorities. Yet Marcos’s view of the Philippines as being irrevocably a part of
those priorities had already become fossilized. After twenty years of power which had seen him and Washington cut some very raw deals, there might also have been an idea at the back of his mind that both parties had too much dirt on each other to risk public recriminations or upsetting a profitable arrangement. His mistake as a Filipino data was to be incapable of seeing that he had gone too far. Datas are not in the habit of having their actions and morals called to account, especially by people they know to have acted every bit as illegally and shabbily as they themselves. It is exactly this mutual stand-off that provides the system with its equilibrium. But this was to reckon without US public opinion, which made itself felt in the very Congress he believed he could safely ignore. To a data, public opinion was simply something that could be manipulated and stage-managed, so in this respect American public opinion was merely no different from that in the Philippines. That reasoning was fine as far as it went; his problem was that he did not control American public opinion, and Washington was doing a very professional job of turning it against him.

By now the Manichaean view of the Philippine crisis was far advanced in the United States, and consequently in much of the world’s media. Once dead, Ninoy Aquino was turned into a saint and martyr, and the sacred flame of liberty had passed to his widow. Her religious nature had been stressed to the point where she too had acquired a kind of sanctity. Her closeness to Cardinal Sin and the Church was evident; she even had her own version of Imelda’s ‘Blue Ladies’ in the shape of her ‘Pink Sisters’ – nuns of the Holy Spirit of Perpetual Adoration order.

The link between Cory and Cardinal Sin was the Jesuits. Cory herself had always been close to the Church, but her famous piety and devoutness was deliberately exaggerated as part of the political necessity for spectacle and typecasting. She is at best a Sunday Catholic, whereas her mother, Doña Aurora, was a genuine Mass-a-day type.

Cory’s casting in the full-blown Passion play that was about to be staged was greatly helped by her appearance, for she looked exactly like a typical Filipina nun. This could never have been said of Imelda Marcos, for instance, who in world opinion these days was looking rather less like Maganda and quite plausibly like Jezebel. Much was also made of the idea of Cory as a ‘humble housewife’, which was pure blarney. The inadequacy of describing any wealthy Filipina with an army of servants in such terms ought by now to be obvious. To portray a highly politicized Opposition leader’s wife from one of the richest landowning clans in the country as though she were Mrs. Cheekered Apron from Apple Pie, Iowa, was nothing short of grotesque. Not knowing any better, Western journalism tended to swallow this fiction whole.

One consequence of this reading of Cory Aquino as a Joan of Arc figure with a divine mission was a widespread impression abroad of an anti-Marcos Opposition united behind her by a solemn purpose. It was in nearly everyone’s interest to promote this notion; but as usual in such circumstances, the more the political era was felt to be nearing its end, the more Marcos’s opponents began jockeying for individual advantage. Beneath the surface, the ‘united’ Opposition embraced a rabble of pretenders and conflicting ambitions collectively represented by the ‘Convener Group’, an umbrella organization advised by Cardinal Sin and made up of sundry interests including the Church, business, women, traditional politicians and so on. The pretenders to Malacañang, who strove to conceal their private designs with more or less adroitness, included Jose Diokno, Jovito Salonga, Ramon Mitra, Doy Laurel and Ninoy’s own younger brother, Butz.

When airing their grievances at their April meeting with the President had produced no tangible results, the RAM officers decided there was nothing for it but to carry out a military coup. Gringo Honasan and the others made Etirel privy to their plan and it took him a week of careful thought before the Defence Minister agreed to join them. The coup was set for either Christmas 1985 or New Year’s Day 1986. In August, meanwhile, the Opposition tried to impeach Marcos on the grounds of having illegally amassed secret wealth abroad, charges that were backed up with evidence collected by the New York Congressman Stephen Solarz and his investigators. The impeachment failed; but since the CIA had been reporting to the White House since the late sixties that both Marroises had been sending huge sums of money abroad, much of it traceable as US aid, the charge ought to have come as no
surprise to the American President. Carter had certainly known what the CIA told him was going on. However, there is no evidence Reagan knew. There were certain kinds of detail his staff realized it was no use troubling him with. If they did not accord with his fantasies he would not take them in. To him, President Marcos was still the version he had met in 1969 as Governor of California: a great war hero and friend of the United States who had made his fortune long before he became President. Moreover, Nancy Reagan and Imelda were close. All sorts of rumours circulated about the relationship between the Reagans and the Marcoses. At a Cory rally in Luneta huge banners asked: “How much salted $ went to Reagan’s campaign fund?” and “Nancy, Nancy, how do you like Meldy’s pears?” It became street wisdom that Reagan went on supporting Marcos because the Philippine President had bought him with a $10 million contribution to his campaign fund “taken in cash, in satchels, to Mexico City where it was ‘laundered’, then deposited in a Houston bank in which [Vice-President] Bush had an interest, and from there turned over to the Reagan campaign fund.” It was equally widely believed that Imelda had given Nancy Reagan $2 millions’ worth of jewellery from Cartier’s.

The RAM officers’ plan for the military coup was now finalized, with both Enrile and Fidel Ramos in full support. The idea was that 400 commandos would attack Malacañang from the river as other units secured the main television and radio stations. If the takeover were successful a junta would be formed with Ramos heading the military and Enrile the civilian interests, pledged to conduct free elections after two years. The plan had the CIA’s backing, and in Washington the State Department went into action with the old Communist bogey in an effort to convince conservative members of Congress that even as Marcos grew weaker the NPA were gaining strength in the Philippines, threatening US business interests and the bases. This was completely untrue, and in any case it was hard to see how bands of guerrillas from the hills could seriously threaten some of the biggest and best-supplied US bases outside the continental United States. That was a mere detail, though. It was just part of a strategy, a preliminary softening-up in preparation for the idea that it was at last time for that old friend and ally, Ferdinand Marcos, to step down. Meanwhile, the coup plans were coming along nicely with the raising of a substantial private army by Enrile in his home province of Cagayan to provide back-up, when in November Marcos announced that he was calling a snap election.

The idea for this seems to have come from a troika of Reagan himself, Senator Paul Laxalt and the CIA’s Director, William Casey. They sold it to Marcos on the grounds that another of his famous victories at the polls would do much to silence the Opposition and defuse the crisis. It would be charitable to call this a naive misreading of the anti-Marcos movement; but since Casey was not a naive man one can only conclude it was astonishingly cynical. The troika’s calculation must have been that Marcos could be relied on to use his normal techniques of guns, goons and gold, plus the good offices of the Commission on Elections and the military to make sure the election went his way. Exactly what Casey’s relation was to his CIA agents who were backing RAM’s plans for a purely military solution will no doubt become clearer when the relevant files are made public. Possibly he was calculating that a glaringly rigged election would spell the end for Marcos, which in the event was more or less what did happen; but it seems very doubtful that President Reagan would have shared this assessment. He really did believe his old friends Ferdinand and Imelda could weather the storm. Ferdinand’s announcement that the snap election would be held on 7 February 1986 obliged Enrile, Ramos and RAM to postpone their plans. To have interrupted an election backed by the US President himself would have made their coup appear completely illegitimate instead of an unavoidable expedient to remove a tyrant.

Ferdinand’s kidney transplant of August 1983 had failed, and he had since had a second one. Swollen from drugs and droplets, he was too ill to do much in the way of active campaigning. Even so, he demonstrated great courage. Some might call it stubbornness or even vanity, because he was living out a fantasy: that of the enduring righteousness of his mission. The ultimate Filipino hero, the father of his people, he believed he still had his duty to perform even if he was feeling a little poorly at the moment. His running-mate, Arturo Tolentino, a decent ‘Manila boy’ and yet another of Ferdinand’s fraternity brothers, was left to do most of the campaigning.

The question of who would be the President’s running-mate had actually revealed some crucial differences of opinion as well as conflicting strategy. O. D. Corpuz, who by then had resigned as
with his Trade Minister to decide his best running-mate does suggest they accepted the prospect of yet another term of office, as well as that they were strategically planning to thwart the possibility of a pre-emptive Wayan takeover by Imelda’s faction. At any rate they seem not to have been privy to the CIA’s knowledge that a RAM coup was likely to render everything academic.

The snap election’s polling day produced a very heavy turnout of voters and — for foreign news-gatherers and observers — a wonderful display of the entire gamut of electoral fraud techniques. It has always been made to seem that Cory Aquino’s forces of good behaved impeccably since theirs was the mandate of heaven and, with virtue on their side, they had no need to cheat. This is cant. Both sides cheated, as they always did in Philippine elections, although as always the incumbent party did the lion’s share since it controlled the military, the police and the electoral machinery. The real difference this time was that Cory’s Laban (‘fight’/’opposition’) party made a considerable effort to expose what the KBL, the President’s party, was up to; and since most of the foreign observers were with Corbyta teams her moral victory was a foregone conclusion, regardless of the election’s outcome. Traditional methods were much to the fore: extraordinary harassment and intimidation, the theft of voter lists and ballot boxes, and the flying of voters from district to district to cast multiple ballots, as well as violence, bribery and electoral registers with hundreds of names missing and those of dead people substituted. Other techniques were startlingly original. The lady who was shortly to wander around the grounds of Malacahan and come upon Imelda Marcos’s private booth of sandwich spread was a NAMPREL observer who had been posted out to Kolonan City in northern Marila. She found her poll-watching mission greatly hampered by being unable to reach the polling booth, along with everyone else, owing to their being ringed by people of ethereal aspect and unhealthy pallor. On enquiry, she learned the truth. They were lepers. Noli me tangere, literally. Some powerful local Marcos supporter, presumably the Mayor, had hit on this brilliantly simple, non-violent method of curbing the democratic process that relied on nothing more than most people’s superstitious dread of the disease. It was rumoured that he had flown the lepers over from the colony in Palawan, but in fact he had simply trucked them

Minister of Education, was horrified by one possibility. The issue then was whether Imelda would run as Vice-President. Since at that time there was no Vice-President and we were managing quite well without one, I went to Marcos and said, “Mr President, the Papacy in the Vatican has no need of a Vice-Pope.” What I couldn’t tell him was that if he had Imelda as Vice-President the Leyte faction might well assassinate him to seize power. Eventually Marcos chose Tolentino. They were fraternity brothers. You must understand that the Philippines is like Japan in that respect. Politicians choose their fraternity brothers for office. If there is no one available they choose their classmates. If there is no classmate, then someone from their same graduation year.2 But it hadn’t been quite that simple. As soon as Marcos announced the snap election his Trade and Industry Minister, Bobby Ongpin, had met with five American heavyweights — mainly high-ranking businessmen but including Frank Zarb, who had been the US Secretary of Energy in the 1970s and was Chief Executive Officer of Lazard Brothers, and Admiral Weinert, the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC). Between them they decided that Ferdinand’s running-mate should be his Prime Minister, Cesar Virata.

Cesar Virata was very honourable, sound, quite inarticulate, the very antithesis of a forceful individual. A strong character himself, but he never stood his ground, never argued with Marcos. That was probably why the President made him his Prime Minister. He was pliable, but nevertheless untainted and reliable and much respected by the US. So I went to the President and told him our choice, and he agreed. Then at the last minute he overturned the decision in a Cabinet meeting because Imelda had rejected Virata. I was so angry I did something I'd never done before. I objected publicly to a Presidential decision. There and then in the Cabinet meeting I protested, saying I thought he was making a big mistake.3

What all this seems to suggest is that, however much it may appear to us now that Marcos’s imminent downfall was a foregone conclusion, this was not at all how it seemed to his more intelligent and impartial ministers at the time. That senior Americans met
over from Kalookan City's own Tala leprosarium. 'Bussed lepers! Only in the Philippines!' as the frustrated voters joked among themselves, more than half-admittingly.

The remainder of the story of those first two months of 1986 is best told briefly, not just because it is so well known but because after twelve years the day-to-day details that were so significant to those who lived through the epic events of the 'People Power Revolution' no longer seem so for those who were not there. Marcos declared himself the winner of the snap election while Cory Aquino made the announcement of her own victory at a huge rally where her claim was publicly endorsed by Cardinal Sin and the bishops. The US Senate passed a resolution condemning Marcos' conduct of the election. Senator Edward Kennedy stated flatly: 'Corazon Aquino won that election lock, stock, and barrel', although he had not been in Manila at the time. (The historian O. D. Corpus still says 'I think Marcos won that last election, but so narrowly he felt it necessary to tamper with the results in order to make it seem like a landslide . . . . [There was cheating on both sides . . . as usual.]

If the main focus of dramatic attention is the 'EDSA Revolution' of the weekend of 23 February, that of political intrigue is surely the laborious process by which President Reagan was finally persuaded to renounce — but never to denounce — his old friend Ferdinand Marcos. Reagan's special envoy to Manila, Philip Habib, never intended to induce Marcos to step down. His mission was to tell him that he could stay on with US backing until his current (i.e., pre-snap election) term expired in 1987, on condition that he sacked Fabian Ver and replaced him with Fidel Ramos as well as making certain Cabinet changes. Marcos refused. Habib then went to Cory Aquino to talk her into doing a deal with Marcos. She, too, refused, holding out for nothing less than the ex-President (in her eyes) leaving office. Behind Habib's back, though, knowing better than he how such negotiations were doomed to fail, the RAM plotters with their CIA backing had decided to go ahead with their coup. Cory might have come out of the election the moral victor, but the electoral process had been a farce and the recriminations might drag on inconclusively for months. Neither Marcos nor Cory was likely to back down: Marcos argued he had constitutionalism on his side, Cory knew she had the angels. The time had come for surgical action.

The coup was accordingly fixed for 2 a.m. on Sunday 23rd. The Palace would be attacked and the Marcoses captured or killed. Enrile would then declare himself head of a 'National Reconciliation Council'. What the plotters did not know was that one of their men had been 'turned' by Ver and was keeping him fully briefed. Ver probably made an early mistake by not moving straight away and arresting Enrile, Ramos and the RAM officers. Instead, he had his Presidential Security Command turn Malacañang into a fortress. When their informants reported this back to RAM, the plotters realized there had been a leak and hastily aborted their plan. Knowing it could only be a matter of time before they were arrested, Enrile and Ramos hurried to their respective strongholds (Ramos to Camp Crame and Enrile to Camp Aguinaldo over the road on E. de los Santos Avenue [EDSA], the Ministry of Defence headquarters). They announced that they and the RAM troops were leading a revolt. At dawn next morning, Enrile moved over to Camp Crame in order to concentrate their forces, 400-odd men nervously facing a potential quarter of a million troops commanded by Ver. A strange inertia now seemed to hamper the detachments Ver sent to picket Camp Crame and dislodge the rebels. Instead of attacking they played for time by calling for reinforcements. The previous evening Ninoy's brother 'Buty' Aquino had made a broadcast over the Church's radio station, Radio Veritas, calling for popular support. And the people came. From all over Manila they came until they formed a crowd of ten thousand which 'Buty' Aquino led down EDSA chanting 'Cory! Cory!', waving yellow flags and flashing the 'L' sign of Cory's Laban. Ferdinand tried to do a deal over the phone with Enrile, but his ex-Defence Minister and sometime Palace lawyer knew things had already gone too far for deals. In Crame, Ramos, Enrile and their RAM group kept in touch with Cory Aquino via Jimmy Ongpin, a leading Oppositionist despite being the brother of Marcos's Trade Minister. Now the commander of the Marines, Brigadier-General Tadjar, brought the tanks and armoured personnel carriers he had been mustering at Imelda's University of Life campus down to EDSA where they trundled towards Camp Crame, intending to ring it. This produced the most memorable
demonstration of 'People Power' when the vehicles were brought to a halt by the crowds, by nuns kneeling in the road in front of the snorting monsters, holding up crucifixes as though to halt Count Dracula, by people climbing onto the tanks' turrets and giving flowers and cigarettes to the bemused young soldiers inside. More and more of the forces sent in by Ver either disobeyed, temporized or deserted. This was fabulous to outdo even the Filipinos' favourite art form: sheerest spectacle heightened by tears, prayers, roadside Masses and the inevitable apparition of the Virgin; an outpouring of hysterical emotion that became hysterical bravery, for over everything hung the imminent likelihood of carnage. There was nobody in the densely packed crowds who did not know what the armed forces were capable of once given their head, and many present had been in Marcos's jails and interrogation centres during martial law. In the bright sunshine the yellow banners and the nuns' white habits – the Vatican's own colours – seemed designed to place the regime's unarmed opponents beneath special protection.

There then occurred an extraordinary scene, televised live from Malacanang, in which Fabian Ver could be heard and seen begging Marcos not to waste any more time but to let him open fire, launch an all-out attack on Camp Crame and put down the revolt regardless of the crowds in the way. Yet the sick and exhausted Ferdinand stubbornly refused to give the order. "To many of those who knew and worked with him, this is still regarded as Marcos's finest hour. It was the moment when, no matter what orders he might have given in the past in the name of expediency, he refused to give the instinctive dictator's command that would have translated into wholesale slaughter. At the very least it showed he had learned from those days spent impotently in his office in the Palace, unable to prevent his armed forces from opening fire on crowds of protesters in the provinces even as he knew it was playing into the Opposition's hands. 'At that moment, I loved the man,' Bobby Ongpin says to this day, and remains immovable on the subject however much he might criticize Marcos for other actions. 'If you can't see the significance of his refusal to fire, that it reveals everything about the man, then you've understood nothing. One could only make sense of some of the things he did if one was there at the time. He was totally autocratic but he was also humane to the point of weakness. The unique thing about the guy is that in the face of his need to cling onto power there was this basic inconsistency of his.'

Even if one accepts that Ferdinand had little taste for bloodshed at first hand, and could hardly have been seen on television openly delegating the task of slaughtering crowds of nuns to Fabian Ver and his Army, one can agree with Bobby Ongpin that there was a strange inconsistency to the man. This was partly because of the fantasy element in his character. One might say that just as he had for many years successfully played the role of war hero, so he had played that of President of the Philippines, maker of history: an act in which part of him sincerely believed. As a true dandy, though, his whole career had in reality been given up to the sterile circularity of pursuing ever more power in order to consolidate the power he already had. It was his private cultural inheritance. And most of this power had been channelled not into necessary social reforms but into ingemous ways of filling his war chest. It had been a compulsive acquisitiveness reminiscent of a squirrel obliviously hoarding nuts even as men with chainsaws prepare to fell the forest. This confusion of private agenda with public image, further muddied by illness, drugs and imminent disaster, left him mentally unprepared for the sudden raw confrontation with hundreds of thousands of Filipino citizens massing on the street who alone, according to the loyal Ver's
urging, stood between him and the retention of that power. It may well have been his fantasy self that saved the day. At some level he had convinced himself that, no matter what dictatorial or electoral methods he had been obliged to use in the past, the majority of his people still respected if not loved him. After all, had he not held power for twenty years? At the very least this meant he had a place in his country’s history that would certainly be denied him if he ended his career in a bloodbath.

A more cynical version of this act of clemency at the height of the EDSA confrontation might run that Washington, in constant touch via their Ambassador in Manila, Stephen Bosworth, had made it very plain to Marcos that if his troops did open fire on unarmed crowds he could forget any idea of being given safe conduct out of the country by the United States. But there is every reason for thinking that Ferdinand neither expected nor wanted to leave the Philippines (not least because he was to spend the three remaining years of his life begging to be allowed to return). What he hoped for was safe escort from the Palace and back home to his field in Ilocos Norte. Yet whichever argument predominated in his confused mind, the incontrovertible fact remains that he did prevent Ver from opening fire, which given the circumstances was in its way a genuine act of heroism to make amends for the more dubious acts of heroism of over forty years previously. Some time later General Ver also received a message from the National Security Council in Washington telling him in effect that if he, too, expected the US to get him out of Manila in one piece, he should at all costs prevent bloodshed.

In deep despair Ferdinand called up Senator Paul Laxalt in Washington to see if anything could be worked out. Laxalt went off to talk to President Reagan and Secretary of State George Shultz before he called back two hours later. A now-famous conversation then ensued. When Ferdinand cooly asked what he ought to do, Laxalt replied:

‘Mr President, I’m not bound by diplomatic restraint. I’m talking only for myself. I think you should cut and cut cleanly. The time has come. Here there was a long pause. Mr President, are you still there? ’Yes, I’m still here,’ came Ferdinand’s voice. ‘I am so very, very disappointed.’

‘Disappointed’ was the word that revealed his sense of having been betrayed by Washington, even as in the meantime over ninety percent of the military had defected to Fidel Ramos, who was receiving phone calls pledging support from commanding officers all over the country. A degree of pathos entered the proceedings. Ferdinand called up his friend Enrile and tried to sue for peace on Enrile’s terms. He said he would cancel the result of the snap election, set up a provisional government with Enrile at its head and stay on in the background as honorary President until 1987 while letting Enrile run things as he liked. In this way constitutionality might be preserved. In fact, Enrile had been just about to leave for Cory Aquino’s oath-taking ceremony; it was too late now for last-ditch compromises. Mrs Aquino, back in Manila again after spending the height of the crisis in Cebu guarded by nuns, was sworn in as President together with her Vice-President Salvador ‘Doy’ Laurel (son of the wartime President Jose Laurel who had once acquitted the young Ferdinand Marcos of murder). Two hours later a sad ceremony was enacted in Malacafang and Ferdinand was also sworn in as President, surrounded by his family and supporters, many of them in tears. It was pure Shakespeare in its evocation of a king shorn of his power. At the climax of the oath-taking, as the old man raised his right hand, the television transmission relaying the proceedings to his former people was abruptly cut as his cousin’s military captured the TV station. Even so, it was not quite the end. The First Couple – and to their sworn courtiers they always would remain the First Couple – made a brief appearance on the balcony where Imelda summoned up her courage and gave a last, tearful rendition of her theme-song ‘Daliri sa Iyo,’ “Because of You”. Thereafter, any remains of collective fantasy collapsed altogether in a mad scramble of packing for departure under escort. The jacquerie was already massing at the Palace gates and could not indefinitely be held off. It was not until later that night as the last helicopter staggered up from Malacafang grounds into the soft air over Manila that the Palace defenders themselves fell back and then, their uniforms hastily changed for jeans and T-shirts, tried to lose themselves in the cheering crowds who came bursting in through the gates and over the railings.
Each year since EDSA, commemorative rallies and Masses have been held on the ring road near Camp Crame in an effort to recreate the magic and significance of those few February days and nights in 1986. And each year, the ever-receding events have been invoked with increasing difficulty by the surviving participants. It is not that individual memories are less acute but that the collective image of what really happened, once so clear, has become increasingly uncertain. The tenth anniversary, with its fly-pasts and general panoply of a state occasion, was certainly a reminder that, like the event it commemorated, it was mainly an affair for Manileños. The people who had turned out for the original 'People Power Revolution' had been almost entirely locals, despite all efforts to imply that it was a nationwide uprising. People in the provinces had not risen as one and surrounded their local PC compound or picketed the nearest AFP camp. Instead, the sense of a regime's collapse had spread from the capital out to the country's periphery as the armed forces' commanders rallied by telephone and radio behind a new military leadership. Moreover, that tenth anniversary had a particularly uneasy hollowness behind it as though the gap between collective fantasy and actuality was no longer bridgeable by sentiment. What was finally obvious was something that few had chosen to notice in the fervor and emotion surrounding the Marcoses' ousting: that it never was a revolution. Worse, for all the spontaneity and extraordinary bravery of those EDSA crowds who were responsible for scripting the climax of a play, the entire production could clearly be seen as having been to a degree stage-managed from elsewhere for two and a half years before the curtain went up on the final act.

Back in 1983, the combination of near-economic collapse (helped along by notorious and uncurbed crony capitalism) and the outrageous public killing of Ninoy Aquino at the very moment of his homecoming from America had made it inevitable Washington would decide that the Presidency of a mortally ill Marcos, after almost eighteen years, was finished. A minor problem was President Reagan's unqualified support for the man. This could largely be ignored; indeed, it was probably quite useful, if embarrassing, that the White House should continue to pledge public support even as the downfall of America's Boy was being planned. Much weightier problems were the question of who his successor should be and how best to exploit the cracks that had opened up in General Ver's armed forces. From the moment Cory Aquino accepted her dead husband's mantle as Marcos's sworn political enemy, Washington began a careful nurturing of relations with both her and the Church, as also with the RAM leadership, whose officers regularly met with contacts from the US Embassy. For his part, Cardinal Sin was in constant touch with a variety of foreign diplomats. All this should have been obvious in retrospect. The United States had always been recognized as the power behind the throne in the Philippines; the withdrawal of that support changed little except the incumbent. The power remained.

This was the source of an enduring sense of grievance on the part of the Marcoses and many of their loyalist camp: not so much the withdrawal of support but the sheer hypocrisy of the way in which it was done. Once the Passion play had been cast with Cory as heaven's right hand and Ferdinand as the depraved prince of darkness, the Americans inevitably appeared as the crusaders in white armour who had enabled good to triumph. It was as though their previous two decades' unflinching support for the prince of darkness were completely forgotten in EDSA's single long weekend. Yet almost no one at the time pointed this out. Everybody was too carried away by the simplistic drama as presented by Cardinal Sin himself. It had had nothing to do with politics, said the prelate, for the Church never meddled in politics. The issue was moral. It was a fight between the forces of Good and Evil (Ferdinand's subsequent apotheosis, complete with the stigmata, was the lumpen-devotionals' triumphant revenge). 'Parachute journalists' - in a favourite contemptuous phrase of his - dropped in fresh from Haiti where a bare week earlier 'Baby Doc' Duvalier's regime had fallen to a military coup. As far as they could see Manila presented much the same scenario as Port-au-Prince. Another Third World tropical city, another sleazy old dictator.

Ferdinand and his supporters continued to nurture a deep sense of betrayal. Washington's switch in loyalties had seemed to them breathtakingly sudden and arbitrary. For the best part of two decades the US had appeared perfectly content with - or at least resigned to - his lazy-style politics. Now, abruptly, the US Congress he had once so triumphantly addressed was rising to denounce the snap election as if it had only now woken up to what it was they
had so long supported. The case Ferdinand had taken to rewrite the Constitution had paradoxically showed the store he set by constitutionalism, which was also something Washington valued highly in its client states. He and many of his supporters remained convinced that the KBL had won the snap election, and in any case a disputed electoral outcome in Manila could hardly be settled by a foreigner like Edward Kennedy getting to his feet in Washington and declaring Cory Aquino the victor. What of legality now? There should have been enquiries, investigations, even a re-run. But no; a declaration of a winner by American fiat and suddenly Cory Aquino is being sworn in as President even as President Marcos still occupies Malacañang. It seemed like a travesty of the law.

Later, and at a more private level, the Marcoses were shocked and hurt by their treatment from the moment the helicopters landed at Clark Field. So far had their American hosts identified with the terms of their own play that this was no longer a sick and ageing President hoping to return to his home province of Ilocos Norte, but a master criminal who could have no further say in where he was being taken, and whose party’s private baggage was separated and ransacked before much of it vanished entirely. This was when the Philippine currency came to light, proving beyond much doubt that the Marcoses had never expected to leave the country. Fabian Ver, on the other hand, had brought his entire family including servants, and had clearly packed for the duration, which suggested that his links to friends in Washington were now better than Ferdinand’s own. It could never have occurred to Ferdinand and his family that Hawaii was to remain his permanent place of exile, but such it proved. He had another three and a half years to live, during which time he frequently petitioned Cory Aquino for permission to return home, but to no avail. He died in Hawaii at the end of September 1989, two weeks short of his seventy-second birthday.

It is only fair to point out that if Ferdinand felt America had betrayed him, the feeling was mutual. Even though successive White Houses went on supporting him, the State Department was frequently miffed at what they saw as his renegoting on their deals. When Washington allowed him to declare martial law, it was conditional on certain guarantees, such as permitting Oppositionists to get out of the country first and not doing anything to interfere with

US business or military affairs. But in addition, Marcos had been expected to carry on with the Parity agreement. This was the post-war amendment to the Philippine Constitution that MacArthur had insisted on as a prerequisite for rehabilitation aid and independence. It gave US citizens parity with Filipinos to exploit Philippine natural resources and operate public utilities. These Parity rights were due to lapse in 1974, and Washington was relying on Marcos to renew them. He never did. But that was not the only reason for US displeasure; there were macro-political considerations, too. Marcos had been expected to help bring other ASEAN countries into line behind US policy. The US wanted a firm foothold in Asia in order to do business with China. They agreed to the old South East Asia Treaty Organization (formed in Manila in 1954 to protect Southeast Asia from Communist aggression) being subsumed by ASEAN because they were counting on Marcos to induce the other members to adopt a pro-American alignment.

Instead, to their fury, Marcos turned out to have his own agenda. He drove a wedge between Japan and the US and, worse, tried to get China as his client. The Japanese were wanting to expand into Southeast Asia — in those days Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand had still not opened up. Marcos welcomed the Japanese back to the Philippines during martial law by means of tourism, trade and industry. The Philippines was the first country in ASEAN to begin heavy trading with the Japanese. The US didn’t like that a bit because the Japanese got to ASEAN before they did. Marcos played a major role in ensuring that ASEAN became much more independent of the US than the Americans had hoped. You have only to look at Mahathir’s Malaysia today.

Similarly, his China initiative upset them, despite Nixon’s ping-pong diplomacy. It hinted at independence. So Marco’s big crimes in Washington’s eyes were over ASEAN, China and the Parity Amendment. His ultimate sin was to try to become leader of the non-aligned countries at the Cancun Summit in 1981.

It can be seen, therefore, that there were grievances on both sides — on all sides, soon, as it turned out, because even the sainted Cory appeared to renge on her tacit obligation to be a compliant
friend of Washington's. The reason, they say, was less from nationalist zeal than from vindictiveness. When her husband had been exiled in Boston, Washington had ignored her. It only paid her attention after Ninoy's assassination, once she had become the focus for the Opposition and as such could serve Washington's purposes. She was not a forgiving person, and maybe this supposed snub gave impetus to a presidential decision she took during the US-Iglesia talks of 1993-1 not to meet US Defense Secretary Dick Cheney when he came to Manila in mid-February 1991. At the time, her government was considerably miffed about what it saw as Washington's unfulfilled commitments as well as an attitude perceived as one of 'Cory-bashing'. So, 'in order to convey to the US the Philippine Government's displeasure', she decided to let her Defense Secretary, Fidel Ramos, see Cheney in her stead. No Filipino head of state had ever done such a thing before. A good few people cheered.

It is doubtful if Marcos himself can ever have held out much hope that President Aquino would allow him to return to the Philippines, even just to die, although he might well have been amazed and slightly gratified had he known that she would not even so much as permit his corpse to be brought back. Evidently it still contained too much political voltage. (It was left to his own cousin, Fidel Ramos, to authorize its return.) As a Filipino, Ferdinand would ruefully have understood Mrs Aquino's motivation as being founded partly on political considerations, but mostly on vengeance. The Philippines' political system is not in practice based on abstract ideals of good governance so much as on emotional issues and of personal point-scoring. Those seen as allies are rewarded, enemies are punished. Ferdinand Marcos's ultimate responsibility for Ninoy Aquino's death, to say nothing of imprisonment, amply justified condemning him to die in exile. Unconstitutional though it might have been, it was a deal everyone understood.

To outsiders, though, and even to many Filipinos, the campaign this pious lady waged against the exiled Marcoses often seemed downright implausible. It was true her husband had been publicly murdered, but it was still quite unclear who had authorized the killing. Maybe her rancour would have been less conspicuous had not so much been made of her devout Christianity. Also, given how long the Marcos era had lasted, how deeply through Philippine society its roots ran, and the trauma caused by its ending, it might have been thought that some sort of reconciliation would be high on any wise incoming President's agenda once justice had been meted out to those with criminal charges against them. Yet here was a strange thing. The Presidential Commission on Good Government (PCGG) began investigating how much vanished wealth it could claw back from cronies and a complex array of Swiss bank vaults and offshore hidey-holes. It could draw on all sorts of help from Washington's voluminous files, for in the early days of Cory's Presidency she could have asked for anything. And yet remarkably little money was recovered and not a single person of any stature was ever jailed, a situation that continues to be true down to the present day. There was no lack of retributions, but there was also a complete absence of criminal proceedings or even extraditions. Instead, there appeared to be a concentration of effort on name-calling and petty measures. 'The Cory Government called everyone who didn't support it a "Marcos Loyalist", even people who didn't support Marcos. This produced a quite unnatural polarity,' as O. D. Corpuz observed. This polarity was, of course, a hangover from EDSA with Washington's Manchurian casting. Even perfectly proper and useful parts of the Marcoses' legacy were allowed to collapse or were boycotted. Thus the Department of Tourism stopped promoting all the successful resorts the previous Administration had developed up the northwestern coast of Luzon. The various sites that Joe Aspin had opened to the profit of the Philippine Government were suddenly ignored. From Bauang, La Union up to Vigan itself and encompassing all those historic Spanish churches Imelda had taken such a fancy to - all were as though written off the map. Indeed, almost anywhere north of Cory's own home ground of Tarlac was practically abandoned as Marcos-tainted territory whenever it came to governmental projects or assistance. In Metro Manila even the most socially useful of Imelda's projects were starved of funds. As for the arts and the Cultural Centre of the Philippines, they were ignored altogether.

Those who still believed in the EDSA polarity must certainly have had their faith severely tested in the months that followed when EDSA's most photogenic hero, Emilie's right-hand man and
original RAM conspirator Gringo Honasan, led a failed coup against the Government he had helped install – one of several that dogged Cory’s term of office. The coup was no kind of joke since it killed, among others, sixty-three homeless street people (including a large number of children), for whose deaths Honasan and his rebel friends were responsible. Honasan became an outlaw, the Philippines’ most-hunted man who, like many a hunted man before him, actually spent a good deal of time living quietly at home in Quezon City. (Today he is a Senator.) This by itself should have alerted observers to the idea that Philippine political realities were stubbornly refusing to keep to Washington’s script, even before Epitule’s bitter retraction of EDSA in 1990 when he implied on a radio programme that he having helped install Cory Aquino had after all been a terrible mistake. (‘I’m sorry ... I apologize to our people for that event.’) Long before then, awful divisions in President Aquino’s own Cabinet had dimmed in a tragic act of utter disillusionment. This was the suicide of Bobby Ongpin’s younger brother Jaime, who had courageously opposed Marcos for years, had been with the rebels throughout EDSA and become Cory’s Finance Minister.

Nearly eleven months earlier, on 22 January 1987, there was a march-rally by farmers who had come to Manila to call on President Aquino to implement the agrarian reform he had resoundingly promised, maybe even to begin with her own family’s gigantic Hacienda Luisita. Eleven thousand protesters converged on Mendiola Bridge, which marks the approach to Malacañang Palace. The underlying mood of the rally was serious but its tactics were non-threatening, being more an EDSA-style celebration with protest songs and street theatre. Towards evening, without warning, police and Marines opened fire on the unarmed peasants, killing thirteen and wounding scores. (Ten years later, the relatives of the dead are still trying to get justice.)

That the Mendiola Massacre, as it is nowadays known, was not merely an aberration or throwback to a previous era was borne out by other statistics. A report released by FIND (Families of Victims of Involuntary Disappearances) on 4 December 1992 revealed that ‘more political activists disappeared during the six-year presidency of Corazon Aquino than during Ferdinand Marcos’s 21-year rule,’ putting the total number of desaparecidos at 15,986. This came shortly after the Medical Action Group had held a symposium and a psychiatrist announced that most political prisoners had undergone torture during the post-Marcos era. And within a matter of days, an ecumenical mission of Church and human rights organizations made an urgent pre-Christmas plea for 1,000 starving and ill families in Antique Province. These were the inhabitants of three villages which had been ‘placed by the military under virtual siege for the last ten years’ and further “fortified” in 1991 by being ordered to amalgamate into one village with only one exit and entrance. (This was the same ‘hamleting’ technique of rural pacification pioneered in the Philippine-American war in the early years of the century and used extensively in the Vietnam war.) The villagers were even prevented from holding prayer groups.

The military suspect such sessions to be fronts for rebel meetings. During Sunday, some paramilitary men would attend worship to spy on churchgoers, residents complain. Not only is the villagers’ religious life affected ... The traditions of evening courtships, serenades, fiestas and thanksgiving have been banned. The use of flashlights at night has also been forbidden. Farmers are prohibited from using axes. Residents are required to secure travel passes when they leave the village.

If Cory Aquino’s Washington-backed democracy now appears less than a holy revolution, it is hardly a surprise. In keeping with Philippine political tradition it was more like musical chairs, with the same elite families and status merely switching around. Teodoro Locsin Jr’s description of martial law as having been ‘in a manner of speaking ... an affair among friends’ is equally true of the country’s entire governmental system. Nothing else explains the way in which none of the notorious thieves and monsters of the Marcos era – all of whom are perfectly well known to most Filipinos – have ever been brought to justice. By late 1997 almost all those who fled before or with the Marcoses were back in the Philippines. Today newspaper published a partial list of the more prominent Marcos-era people in power, starting with Ferdinand’s own cousin and police chief, President Fidel Ramos, and going on from there.
Eleven years after the EDSA People Power Revolt, the chronicles of former President Marcos...now dominate both the ruling Lakas-NURD and the opposition...Most of the 217 congressmen, from the Speaker down to the opposition, once belonged to Marcos's KBL. (It has prompted a former anti-Marcos activist to say that the list of the members of the House is like the old guest book of Malacañang. 'The old guards [of the EDSA revolution] are gone. In their place are the praetorian guards of Marcos,' the source said. Most prominent of the KBL stalwarts is former First Lady and now Rep. Imelda Marcos of Leyte. Mrs Marcos and her husband's former pilot, Rep. Roque Abian of Ilocos Norte now lead the KBL remnants. Lakas Rep. Luz Csta Bakunawa of Masbate was Marcos's personal secretary. Speaker Jose de Venecia, President Ramos's chief political lieutenant and secretary-general of Lakas, is a Marcos-appointed diplomat to Saigon who became a congressman in the 1970s. Lakas Rep. Ricardo Silverio of Bulacan was the owner of the defunct Delta Motors and one of Marcos's business cronies. Three former Marcos Cabinet members are House Minority Leader Ronaldo Zamora, former presidential chief legal counsel; Lakas Reps. Carmencita Reyes of Marinduque, social welfare and development minister; Jose Aspiras of La Union, tourism minister; and Rodolfo del Rosario of Davao del Sur, natural resources minister..."

The complete list goes on endlessly. One of the proposals made to Cory Aquino when she became President was to put a special clause in the new Constitution banning all those who had served Marcos from public office for five years. This was modelled on the example of Argentina after the Colonels, though there the ban was for ten years. The idea was to give those who had set their aspirations on the high ideals of EDSA a chance of being elected in the first post-EDSA Congress. This motion was successfully opposed by Peping Cojuangco, Cory Aquino's younger brother. The ex-journalist and former Marcos-era Ambassador J. V. Cruz is his usual outspoken self on the subject:

"Look around you...the Marcos era...it's still here. Look at Ramos himself. Look at the next crop of 'presidentiables' for 1998: Estrada, Moced, De Venecia. The only one not tainted by having been a Marcos man is the current Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. The rest were not mere associates but close associates of Marcos. Look at the roll of the current House of Representatives. More than half are associated with, and tainted by, their Marcos connections. They won their seats by election, too, so obviously their constituents didn't give a damn. If a lot of Filipinos look back to Marcos with nostalgia - and they do - we owe it to Cory Aquino. It's only possible for most people to be nostalgic about Marcos because Aquino was so awful...I give FVR [Fidel Ramos] high marks for retrieving us from the depths, though nothing radical has changed, of course. All he does is show the sort of minimal competence one has the right to expect in a President.""
of martial law was once more floating about the corridors of power. It was hardly surprising, given that Filipinos knew their own history so well. The parallels between the perceived conduct of the present Government and that of the Marcos administration all those years ago suddenly surfaced alarmingly:

Ramos, it has been said, has been acting like Marcos. Armed Forces Chief of Staff Armalino Acorda has been acting like Fabian Ver, the Armed Forces Chief during the dictatorship. National Security Adviser Jose Almonte is acting like Marcos's then-Defence Secretary Juan Ponce Enrile. And Gabriel Claudeto, Ramos's adviser for political affairs, is acting like Leonardo Perez, who served Marcos in various capacities (like being COMELEC chairman) and whose loyalty to the dictator rivals Ver's...17

This degree of scepticism is most eloquent. If professional journalists have so little confidence in the democratic instincts of politicians they have known for so long, what can one say of Juan de la Cruz out there in the provinces? How does the great majority of Filipinos living outside Manila react to these ever-unchanging power games played out among the political elite charged with leading their country to peace and prosperity? To answer this question, one final story may be cited. It is one I recounted some years ago in a book about the sea, but make no apology for updating here. Its appoisiteness grows with each year of official silence that goes by until it almost aspires to the status of parable. Moreover, it was an incident whose outward sign was witnessed from Kansulya.

1997 was the tenth anniversary of the world's worst-ever maritime disaster, the sinking in the Philippines of the M/V Dela Paz. Over three times as many people died in this as did in the Titanic, but owing to a complete absence of American millionaires and British socialites aboard the event is never likely to attract the attention of Broadway or Hollywood. That it involved a vessel ultimately owned by an American oil company has also been conveniently forgotten.

The Dela Paz, a 2,215-ton inter-island ferry, had been on route from Tacloban in Leyte province (coincidentally Imelda's home port) to Manila, grotesquely overladen with passengers for the Christmas holiday season. Not only was the ship's departure delayed fourteen hours to take on this illegal complement of passengers but she stopped a few hours later at Catbalogan in Samar to pick up still more. She was provisioned for a maximum of 3,000 and by the night of 20 December food and drinking water had long since run out. Life-rafts and life-jackets, which at best could never have sufficed for more than a fraction of those aboard, were variously holed, rusted, missing or locked inaccessible away. Shortly before midnight in the Tablas Strait off Mindoro the Dela Paz collided with the M/T Vector, an unlighted and rusty tanker owned by Caltex (Philippines). This hulk was barely seaworthy and carrying a highly inflammable cargo which included over 8,000 barrels of fuel oil from a Batangas refinery. The two ships exploded in a fireball visible forty miles away over the horizon on Kansulya beach, a stupendous bonfire of children and diesel oil and Christmas presents. There were twenty-eight survivors.

The incident did cause headline news - albeit briefly - around the world. The Pope expressed his anguish, along with several heads of state. President Cory Aquino ordered an 'all-out probe' that was to leave 'no stone unturned'. Then everyone returned gratefully to Christmas. Not until November the following year - and then only after another accident involving one of its vessels - were the operations of Sulpicio Lines, who owned the Dela Paz, briefly suspended in an administrative slap-on-the-wrist. A survivor from the Dela Paz said that her captain, who did not himself survive, had been drunk and playing mat-jong at the time of the collision. A witness from the tanker testified that the Vector's bridge had been completely empty. The charge filed against Caltex was for carrying 'a highly dangerous mix of cargo in a grossly inadequate and unseaworthy vessel'.18

The victims had been mainly from Leyte and Samar, and their relatives formed an organization (Bagyong Kite, Samar og Leyte, which means 'I'll help you, Samar and Leyte' in Cebuano) to press for an official enquiry and compensation. In a reference to the disaster in my book Seven-Tenth (1992) I said that the official estimate of the dead was 3,000, this being the maximum number of passengers the Dela Paz had been legally entitled to carry, but added 'it is certain to have been many more'. This was partly because children
under the age of ten were never listed on passenger manifests at the time and it was a safe bet that travellers heading for Christmas family reunions in Manila would have taken every last infant. It is now generally accepted by journalists as well as by Bulág Kita that over 5,000 died, though the true figure can never be known. Whatever is left lies in 500 metres of water. In May 1989, eighteen months after the disaster, Sulpicio Lines claimed that 86 percent of the passengers aboard the Dólita Paz have been paid for at P50,000 per victim (about $6000). That is, eighty-six percent of those whose names appeared on the ship's manifest — in other words 2,580 passengers, probably about half the real total. The company admitted no liability whatever for the passengers it had illegally carried and who could not now be reliably identified. The whole issue was further muddied for both the company and the victims' relatives by hundreds of impostors who, swelling money, came forward to file entirely fictitious claims of their own.

The one certainty is that no one has ever been arrested, prosecuted or tried, still less sentenced. President Aquino's 'all-out probe' soon withered into inertia in the usual way: sidetracked by allegations and counter-allegations, subjected to delaying tactics and blinded by legalistic smokescreens. Every stone of any weight was scrupulously left unturned. It remains a crime that to this day has gone completely unpunished. Not even the relevant coast guard officials in Tacloban, who was technically responsible for assuring the shipping lines' compliance with lading regulations, was called to account or admonished. Credibility was further stretched when barely ten months later the Dólita Marilyn, another Sulpicio Lines ferry, was lost in typhoon Uring. Far from being an act of God, it was the direct consequence of an act of criminal stupidity in that the ship's captain, together with Manila port officials, the coast guard and Sulpicio directors had decided to risk their vessel leaving port at a time when the typhoon was forecast to hit its destination in the Visayas and was being monitored from as far away as Hong Kong. The Dólita Marilyn made it as far as Samar, where it sank in pitiful circumstances. At the time the death toll was put at 340, but similar principles were involved as with the Dólita Paz, and the unofficial toll soon went higher.

The case against Sulpicio Lines over the Dólita Paz continues to this day as the families of victims who were not declared in the

ship's manifest battle wearily for compensation. Even if their campaign is successful there will remain a deep sense of injustice over the way all those responsible for the crime have in effect been pardoned by the de facto amnesty of sheer lapse of time. Mrs Aquino has long since left office and nobody is tacitly enough to remind this famous Christian lady of her promise of an 'all-out probe'. Sulpicio Lines has upgraded its fleet and the company's family administration has changed since 1987. As for the owners of the M/T Vector, they soon melted away behind a haze of PR. 'Doing its share to be a responsible corporate citizen,' as a headline described the company in a 1992 interview with its new president and CEO, William S. Tiffany.

Caltex has always considered its role as a responsible corporate citizen of its host countries as an important part of its doing business all over the world. Tiffany has said that the company worldwide always 'tries to be a good citizen'. 'Whenever Caltex does business, it looks for ways to help the community around it,' he explained. 'We have a corporate philosophy of putting back into the community much more than the local taxman demands from us.'

That the Titanic had only enough lifeboats for half its passengers was a good enough reason for successful lawsuits to be entered against her owners, whether or not the chance encounter with a stray iceberg had been an act of God. That the Dólita Paz had virtually no safety equipment aboard — even though the explosion would have rendered it irrelevant — came as no surprise to anyone in the Philippines.

Wherein lies this story's near-parable status? What is remarkable is the seeming passivity, not just of the authorities, but of the Filipino public itself. After the original outcry, made all the more emotive for the juxtaposition with the festive season, the story quickly faded. Except when some new accident makes newspaper editors remember the ship, or a reporter covers a fresh campaign by Bulág Kita to draw attention to their still-unsettled case, the Dólita Paz has simply vanished into gulfs of oblivion. In fact the public's resignation is entirely understandable. It was merely one more — albeit by far the worst — in a long line of sinkings and disasters...
which have gone unpunished and largely uncompensated. Nobody expected anything to happen, so nothing did. Ten years later it could be seen that the tragedy did have some salutary effect in that when President Ramos came to power the discrepancy between his vision of ‘Philippines 2000’ and the derelict hulls still plying his country’s domestic sea lanes made a degree of change inevitable. There are many newer vessels today on inter-island routes. Even so, an impression is left that the impetus for this came as much from a desire for greater economic efficiency and to make the Philippines’ image more attractive to foreign investors as out of interest for the safety of its citizens, for there are still plenty of ‘floating coffins’ (as the press calls them) on minor routes.

In this, then, lies a partial answer to that question of how the Juan de la Cruzes of Kansaluay and elsewhere view the perennial shenanigans of Manila’s governmental elite. One speaks of the ‘seeming’ passivity of the Filipino public advisedly. This has nothing to do with the Western racial stereotyping of Easterners as being more callous about death. It is not about callousness; it is about despair. The patient glance, the shrug, the half-smile, the joke: these are forms of a stoicism learned centuries ago. On and on it goes, keeping pace with the constant failure of the political merry-go-round to satisfy anything other than itself. One might even go so far as to argue that half the more bizarre cases that hit the headlines in the Philippines and catch the attention of foreign editors have their origins in sheer despair as much as in ordinary criminality.

This underlying despair, so brilliantly concealed by the culture’s predominant cheerfulness (‘Where Asia Wears a Smile!’) seems to me what unites incidents like that of the Dollo Pat – which in many another country could have led to the government’s fall – with the Mendiola Massacre, even with the ‘EDSA Revolution’ itself. For what is as plain as the gap between Manila and the Philippines is that gulf between political process and the people. EDSA’s bravery, characteristically masquerading beneath a fiesta-like atmosphere, was itself born of despair. This was partly twenty years’ desperation that the country’s mock-democratic system could only administer the nation it was supposed to serve by calling out the armed forces to drag it into submission, when all that the vast majority of its people had ever wanted were some basic living standards.

But another part of the despair would have stemmed from the hidden knowledge that substituting an oligarch for an autocrat was no kind of revolution. Only the hysteria of the moment could have prevented this glum awareness from surfacing. Shear away all the nonsense about good and evil and what really were the differences between Marcoses and Aquinos? Super-rich datus with their fraternity brotherhoods, internarratives, internecine rows and reparations, scheming for power and yet more power; by turns advantageously flirting with the Church, Masonry, Communism, the United States; stealing the people’s foreign aid and putting it into private bank accounts and property scattered throughout the world. What kind of leadership was this? The answer to which, of course, was the most despairing of all: the Filipino kind, the one we have; the one we might by now have long since rid ourselves had it not been for the global self-interests of a foreign power. There it is.

Away in Kansaulay villagers survey the diminished river. Or else the subsistence fisherman gazes down at the dying reef. At night the city-like lights of the fishing fleets owned by powerful consorts are sometimes bright enough to cast his shadow on the beach. He watches as, unpolicied, they illegally come inshore to sweep up his livelihood with their superior technology. Useless to complain. He is represented in Congress by a person who owns such a fleet. ‘Ilo,’ he says with that same smile. ‘Ilo. ‘This. All there is to say.
The Marcoses were the best of us, and the worst. That's why we say we hate them so much. Thus the journalist, Rod Dula, summing them up and adding, 'This country looks for two things: either idols or demons.' This may sound suspiciously epigrammatic, even simplistic, but the role of the Church in the Marcoses' unseating, no less than that of Washington, made their demonizing inevitable. The myth of their being an outstanding evil whose complete purging from Philippine society somehow implied that the country would then return to a state of prediapason grace was the last great fantasy surrounding the Marcoses. It would have been an injustice if only because it singled them and their era out for damnation instead of blaming an entire political system that had too well suited its last colonials. Few people at the time said loudly enough that the antique philosophy of the robber barons had already prevailed for too long and it was high time such energy was channelled into the common good. If Ferdinand Marcos ran true to form by being a consummate old-style politician it was only what Washington and Filipinos—despair and all—had expected.

There is an irony here. The boy from Batac, despite his youthful dynamism, his early technocratic intentions, his infrastructural achievements and his progressive social legislation, remained profoundly out of date. He was old-fashioned in an old-fashioned system that required him to act as ana at bottom. Even as he rose to the presidency, he could not rid himself of the administrative classes, the judiciary and the military. And at that level, it is true, he was an expert. He had been brought up on exactly these techniques and had no real wish to shake himself free. If his war experiences had led him cynically to believe that anyone could be bought, he found nothing in Filipino public life to suggest he was mistaken. Even his critics readily concede how politically adroit he was in his understanding and manipulation of the grassroots politics of alang-an lalot, but will add 'and used it for his own purposes.' Well, of course. That is what politicians do. The critics go on to counter that a halfway enlightened Ferdinand might have harnessed his populist skill at least as much for the nation's good as for the Marcos family's fortunes. So he might; but that was an old-style country politics. It was a consummate old-style politician thinly disguised as Prince Charming the Filipino electorate had voted into office in 1965. This being so, there was more than a touch of hypocrisy in the way he was summarily heaped with the nation's dirty laundry in 1986 and driven out into the wilderness as though what was left behind was miraculously shriven and already convalescent.

One can remain a cynic and say that Marcos had always intended to become President expressly to make a fortune, and that anything he might have done for his country along the way would be purely coincidental. Alternatively, one can say that despite being an old-style politician he had become President with some genuine ideals, but that something happened to him that made things go wrong. Greed, moral obliquity, arrogance, American pressures, his own wife, illness—all have been suggested as explanations for this genuine puzzle.

Ironically, given his constant description as a 'strongman' or 'dictator', Marcos turns out to have had a surprising streak of weakness in his character. Nor matter what those closest to him might say, much of his strength in office derived from practically unconditional US backing, and later from his own steady militarization of the political scene. Had he really been as determinedly idealistic as his judgement told him he should be, he would surely have done more to implement land reform, at least to the point where it might have defused the growing antagonism of the left. If he was unafraid during martial law to break the oligarchs who had annoyed him, he could surely have made large landowners agree.
President Marcos's New Order. The political and social landscape of the Philippines had undergone significant changes. The Marcos regime had implemented policies aimed at modernization and development, but these initiatives were often characterized by authoritarianism and a concentration of power. The economy expanded, but it was accompanied by growing inequality. The Marcos administration was criticized for its corruption, inefficiency, and human rights violations.

As time passed, the Marcos regime became increasingly isolated. The United States, a former ally and significant aid provider, began to distance itself from the Philippines. This was partly due to the Marcos administration's increasingly authoritarian and repressive policies. The Marcos regime's perceived shortcomings and the increasing international scrutiny led to a growing sense of backlash, particularly among the Philippines' youth.

Marcos's health began to deteriorate, and his执政期间的健康状况开始恶化，这使他更加依赖他的政治同盟。随着他的健康状况的恶化，他的政治影响力逐渐减弱，这导致了民众对他的不满情绪的加剧。最终，1986年，菲律宾人民在“人民力量革命”中推翻了马科斯的政权，结束了他的统治。

The fall of the Marcos regime marked a significant turning point in Philippine history. The transfer of power to a new administration brought with it promises of change and reform. However, the challenges facing the new government were immense, and the process of reconstruction and reconciliation was lengthy and complex. The legacy of the Marcos era continues to be a subject of debate and reflection in Philippine society.

Early in the 1980s, as the Marcos regime faced increasing international pressure, the administration took steps to diversify the economy and reduce its dependence on foreign aid. The government initiated programs aimed at promoting private sector growth and foreign investment. This period marked the start of a transition towards a more market-oriented economy.

The Marcos regime's policies also had significant implications for the country's foreign relations. The Philippines was no longer seen as a reliable ally by the United States and other Western powers. This shift in foreign policy alignments posed challenges for the new government, which had to navigate a complex geopolitical landscape.

Despite these challenges, the Marcos regime managed to secure significant foreign aid from various countries, including the United States. However, the prolonged political instability and the Marcos administration's human rights abuses led to growing international pressure. The Marcos regime's response was to increasingly rely on military force to maintain control.
had with Senator Lacalt on the telephone. Not until the senator had told him to 'cut and cut cleanly' did he realize it was all over. The revelation is that this news had to come from an American. His own people had been telling him the same thing for weeks, months, years, but he was deaf to them. Only when an American senator told him he was no longer useful did this self-proclaimed nationalist Filipino patriot at last perceive how things stood. But then, he was not the only one to have been misled. The waiting crowds outside the Palace and on E. de los Santos Avenue were convinced they themselves had brought him to justice.

It could even be argued that ultimately it was not those largely middle-class crowds of nuns, priests, journalists, teachers, doctors, businesspeople and students at EDSA who proved to be Marcos's nemesis, nor even the policy-makers of Washington. No matter how indirectly, his undoing stemmed from Juan de la Cruz - from The People out in the provincial barangays whom he had so tirelessly and expensively wooed. It was none of their conscious doing, of course. Much of his loyal support came - still comes - from this grassroots level, from the folk that any traditional politician tried to put under an obligation of loyalty: the lowest but stoutest rung of his ladder to the Presidency. It was Ferdinand's desire to be every Filipino's personal hero, and it was surely this that precipitated his fall.

The sheer ambitiousness of the scheme demanded unlimited amounts of cash; for the Christmas tree; and in generating the requisite money he made an inherited system of corruption and graft work with unprecedented efficiency and on a scale never dreamed of by his predecessors.

It was his political intelligence that recognized this end and devised the means. It was his entrepreneurial skill, betrayed by a genuinely amoral pragmatism that he saw mirrored in Washington, which led him into the ever-deepening swamp he failed to perceive until it was too late. By then he was a sick man and probably lacked the energy to extricate himself, or even to want to. There were too many hands reaching out to grasp his own, pulling him not out but onward: too many allegiances, too many Ilocano blood ties, old debts, atavistic urgings. Too much uncritical American support, telling him that the White House was behind him all the way. There were also too many dire threats for him to dare stop and retrace his steps: NPA guerrillas re-grouping after the setbacks of early martial law, Palace factions who wanted his power, the legalistic tangle he himself had so skillfully woven to cover his tracks.

So onward he had to go, led as much by his own failings as by the lesser and greedier men who battered on him. It is notable that of all the cronies who tugged at his sleeves even as they helped ruin their country's economy, not one but made it to dry land at last, showered carefully in rose water, and went off to stash his fortune in a safe place abroad. The Marcoses were left to sink alone in the mud, which in Ferdinand's case he did in exile with a curious dignity that increased the more the world rallied to pelt him.

What, then, of his wife? Had Imelda Marcos been a character in a novel she would have been one of the world's great literary creations. As it is, she is a remarkable work of her own imagination as well as of the Filipino psyche. Because the majority of her countrymen has a weakness for glamour she gave them glamour, with the canny overkill which is yet another aspect of that Filipino disparagement of the worldly which makes them parody what they most affect to covet.

She was brought up a Catholic, inheriting the demure Spanish moral precepts appropriate to a lady. But the insidious cultural influences of the age were almost exclusively American. She and her school friends looked to Hollywood (Favourite actresses: Ingrid Bergman - they must have just seen Casablanca). The values to which she and her friends aspired were inevitably those of the American way of life which in the triumphant post-war era was proclaimed by every hoarding, billboard and advertisement. How could it have been otherwise, in an ex-colony which did not achieve full independence until Imelda was seventeen and was thereafter administered with a governmental, judicial and educational system cloned from that of the United States? Whether or not she knew it, she raised her own version of the American Dream (log cabin to Oval Office, garage floor to Malacaiang) to a pitch of pure satire, winding up by having more money and power to throw around than all those tacky Mellons and Rocketellers put together. (For a time it became her practice to leave little bowls of pearls in the bedrooms of distinguished guests, much as an attentive hostess might leave pot-pourri; and what an infinite satisfaction it must
have been to find that the little bowls were nearly always empty when the guest left! What was it those moralizing school textbooks of hers had quoted? "If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue, 'O walk with Kings - nor lose the common touch..."
Not only did she talk with more crowds in a year than Kipling saw in a lifetime, she had kings eating out of her hand, while mere colonels simply rolled over and purred. And what of those awe-inspiring social sets? Hollywood and the White House? Hollywood stars trailed after her like lapdogs. (Brooke Shields, gazing at a black chiffon gown with a great diamante collar Imelda was wearing on a gala night: "Oo la la! Those are real diamonds Mrs Marcos has sewn on her dress! That's really nice!" as her hostess's neck sparkled and flashed in the spotlight like one of those revolving mirrored balls in a disco.) Indeed, Hollywood can clearly be seen as having exercised a formative influence on Imelda's creation of her own myth. This is true in terms of style and imagery as well as in her choice of husband who, as a bright and ruthless country boy with glamorous shady connections, was a rougher diamond than she ever was. In this way he might be seen as having neatly filled that category of rough trade that certain ambitious female stars occasionally prefer.

What on earth could five successive American Presidents have thought, as this extraordinary creature who had so outrageously transcended her protégée status flirted and flirted and sang through their stolid courts? Beside Imelda their own First Ladies looked, well, a bit morelly and virtuous, to say the least. But even here the high ground went to this dazzling Filipina. She not only out-cornered them ("my life story is Motherhood. Mothering is the centre of life") but her incredible list of public works and social projects made their own handful of drying-out clinics look like mere hobbyhorses.

What was all this if not a superb kind of revenge? (For no one close to her ever doubted a steeliness within that occasionally escaped and caused mortal injury. The stories of her vindictiveness are legion, even in a culture that demands scores be settled.) Revenge for the garage floor on General Solano, revenge for the petty snobberies of the Manila elite - these are indeed sometimes mentioned as possible motivation for certain of her actions. But I have never yet seen America itself suggested as a major target of her ire. Yet it is hard to think of a better explanation for her having turned her office into a blatant travesty of the very values and ideals the American colonizers of her country had brought for the edification of the Filipino and which they themselves so frequently transgressed. How can one not see in the earnest neo-Platonism of Mahabharatam a hilarious parody of all those improving schoolbooks the Thomists and missionaries brought over to the Philippines at the turn of the century? Her book captures exactly the same Judeo-Christian solemnities of thought and expression, but turns them around completely so that instead of describing the noble qualities of the white race they now extol the Mahabharatam-like nobility of a proudly brown people striving for freedom. It is the final nail in Hawwa's coffin.

I do not for a moment think this was conscious on her part (especially given her dislike of the colour brown and its fecal associations); but I see no reason why the deep residual nationalism of her people (and they were her people) might not have inspired much that she did. That this sometimes led to disaster, to gestures that could look like someone cutting off their nose to spite their face, is no argument against it. The frustration of centuries can occasionally be glimpsed in Kasulay, too, as a sudden, black, nihilistic streak amongst all the cheerful humour and religiosity.

Now and then this national trait leads to extravagant acts of violence which, though ostensibly directed against others, often seem as much aimed at the self, at inherited ghosts. Running amok in a great cathartic rampage can only end in one way, like Samson pulling down the temple of Gaza onto his own head. Such an image may appear wildly out of place when discussing Imelda Marcos, an ex-beauty queen and a President's widow - "a true stateslady", as I heard one of her friends describe her. Yet some of the things she did may have constituted a super-rich, super-powerful person's way of running amok, always with that bleak inner gleam of self-destruction.

This is why I think she would have made a great literary creation. Since she is sui generis I am not sure whom she would have resembled. Her court was indeed for years decadent and debauched, though less in the self-indulgent manner of aesthetes and voluptuaries than of medievale monarchs or Renaissance war-lords. (By the early eighties, certain memorable dinner-parties in
Manila apartments resembled nothing so much as scenes from Petronius's _Satyricon_, complete with naked children as waiters.) Literary seekers of pleasure and sensation like Des Esseintes and Dorian Gray might have been fabulously vulgar in their refinement and silly Yellow Book amorality, but they were also disdainful and jaded. Imelda was anything but jaded. Her energy was voracious. Besides, the gold, the jewels, the gallons of scent and 'aerobic shopping' represented not an extreme of exquisiteness but an excess of commodities. Patrick Bateman, the hero of Beatt Easton Ellis's brilliantly revolting satire of consumer society, _American Psycho_, was a beginner at brand-name shopping compared with Imelda. An entirely empty character, he was able to be defined only by what he bought. Imelda defined herself by being the buyer; what she bought scarcely seemed to matter so long as she had more of it than anybody else. It was enough to be the patron saint of conspicuous consumption. In any case, what all these literary characters lack is the least hint of tragic stature. Imelda Marcos unquestionably has it. It is as if she always knew that, far from defining her, this avalanche of objects was irrevocably burying her; and that if such were the case, then one might as well go for broke and add to the avalanche. (In this way she was perhaps not unlike her husband in his attitude to ludicrous wealth.) Hers was everybody's secret omnipotence made real, only thwarted at a later stage than seemed possible for a mere mortal. It was all quite Greek in its way.

Imelda's ability to scandalize would have made any Wildean hero envious. It was a power she raised to the level of an art form in its flaunting of both the Catholic and American decorums of her upbringing. Once again, this was surely unconscious; and her unflagging espousal of that trademark litany of 'the Good, the True and the Beautiful' (as well as her assurance to me 'I have nothing to look back on with shame') is, I am convinced, perfectly sincere. Nevertheless, so successfully did she épater the international bourgeoisie that to this day at least half the world genuinely believes itself shocked by her. The terms are always the same moral outrage and accusations of criminality or trust betrayed. This was summed up in an exchange I once had with the writer Frank Sionil José while driving down the Zambales coastal road. FSJ: 'She and Marcos were evil.' JH-P: 'Are you speaking as a religious person, Frankie?' FSJ: 'No. I'm speaking as a Filipino.'

Far be it from a foreigner, then, to attempt to overturn this stark verdict. Nevertheless I do think it interesting how, as a general rule, when public figures of Mrs Marcos's stature fall from grace they are almost never accorded a tithe of the understanding that is legally granted an anarchist or a mad ax murderess. If such common criminals were not allowed to enter in their own defence details of miserable and abused childhoods it would quite properly be thought a denial of their rights. What woman accused of shoplifting might not expect a wave of sympathy to go around the court when her counsel described how she had as a child slept on wooden planks in the garage of her father's house and as a young bride had been driven to a nervous breakdown by her husband's nefarious way of life? Yet for some reason money and position are assumed to abrogate such a basic right, just as they are evidently believed to annul psychic damage. Sheer power and wealth are magically expected to exempt one from the malign legacy of one's own past, as if suddenly becoming rich could rewrite childhood and silence an ache and its echo.

This is by the way, however. To return to the question of the moral outrage Imelda can still provoke, much of it clearly contains an element of hypocrisy. The wave of condemnation that pursued her and her ailing husband to Hawaii in 1986 was predicated on something which was never stated. They had 'raped their country' and 'abused their position' and had 'acted like common thieves', but it was as though no other Filipino politician had ever done so or would again. It was conveniently overlooked that plenty of Presidents before Marcos—some would say all of them —had abused their position, although perhaps 'exploited its possibilities' would be a more delicate phrase. And as for acting like common thieves, the two succeeding Administrations showed how commonplace thievery could be (to say nothing of prodigious corruption) even though both Presidents held themselves personally aloof from the time-honoured practice. In short, the subtext of the public outrage aimed at the Marcoses was that they had been aberrations, freakish exceptions; whereas in truth they were exceptional only for having taken normal political habits to new extremes. What was being packed off to Hawaii in disgrace was Caliban's mirror.
I used to ask friends in Kansulay what they would have done had they been in Ferdinand’s or Imelda’s position. They would assume a wistful expression. ’Well, taking care of the family is number one, of course,’ they would say. ’That’s only natural. After that, well…’ The women often seemed more intrigued by the idea of Imelda’s power than by a dream of diamonds. I’d soon sort some people out around here, they would say darkly. ’But I’d be quite fair, of course.’ Of course. Inevitably, the one thing they all left out of their fantasies of themselves-as-Imelda was her style, because it cannot be copied and is based on the private parodic certainty that nothing exceeds like excess. This was the other part of Imelda that used to enrage people, her apparent flaunting of taste and convention. To have mocked the accepted pieties of Western-style government was one thing; but only she could have extended this demolition into the field of religion and deliciously confused the cult of the Santo Niño with that of herself.

This cult is of near-ubiquitous significance in the Philippines. It has its roots in Magellan’s gift on her baptism to the Queen of Cebu in 1521 of a statue of the Holy Child. The figure of the Sto. Niño thenceforth spread with Christianity throughout the archipelago. The Sto. Niño, like the Marías’ Nazareno of Quiapo, is a spirit-manifestation of Jesus Christ. Naturally, the widespread belief during the ’EDSA revolution’ that the crowds who defied the tanks were possessed and protected by the Sto. Niño was in no way affected by Mrs Marcos’s being herself a prominent devotee of this powerful cult. Her devotion was such that she built an enormous— even flamboyant— shrine in Leyte which was widely accused of being quite as much about Imelda as it was about the Christ Child. (A prominent lady in the world of publishing tells of her mother visiting the shrine in the late seventies, where she found a diorama of Imelda’s early life showing her as having been a college at a convent school, implying private wealth. ’She was never any such thing!’ said the mother indignantly. ’She had no private school education at all. It was a complete fiction, I’m afraid. Really, that all belonged to her image-building period. After that, she went into jet-setting.’)

Yet to build a basilica to the greater glory of the Infant Jesus and then to fill it with bedrooms as well as displays of scenes from a private fictitious past was no ordinary lese-majesty. It is quite pointless to confront such things with conventional displays of outrage because Imelda never intended outrage. On such occasions she managed to transcend mere matters of taste and left people with little to do but gape in helpless acknowledgement that she had always had this dumbfounding element in her.

In the case of her huge Sto. Niño shrine in Olot, there is perhaps a parallel with what she did in Makati at Malacañang. To insert herself and her own personal history into the Philippines’ most popular religious cult is not dissimilar to having inserted herself retrospectively into Filipino history (even invoking Ancient Egypt) to the extent that she and her husband could appear as that history’s destiny. Here is an egotism so exalted there is literally nothing it cannot subsume, even as it does so with sincere protestations of humility. Toujours de l’audace! Attempts to rewrite the past always do strike Westerners as particularly outrageous (one remembers those scornful jokes about Soviet Russia doctoring its photographs in order to eliminate faces since fallen out of favour). But from the moment the young Imelda Romualdez had successfully made Mayor Lacson change the results of a beauty contest even after it had been won and the winner announced, she must have known she had inherited to the point of genius an instinct already present in the national character: provided the accompanying pageantry is sufficiently over the top, anything can be made possible. This was the basic tenet behind her putting up ‘ancestral homes’ while dressing Ilocos Norte for daughter Irene’s wedding, her confident invention of instant dynasties— another harmless piece of fantasy by no means unknown on the other side of the Pacific. People later made stern remarks about ’the arrogance of power’; but in its utter refusal to accept normal limits, Imelda’s sense of her own power went way beyond mere arrogance and became something else, something like a sublime sense of mockery. (Looking for a parallel, one thinks of Stalin’s famous fez-jovial warning to Lenin’s widow who was fussing about his plans to change one of Moscow’s boulevards. ’Dear Nadezhda Krupskaya,’ he said. ’Do remember we can always find someone else to be Lenin’s widow.’) Lurking at the back of one’s mind is the suspicion that Imelda’s unconscious was holding up to ridicule the whole ethos of ‘can-do’ Americanism on which she had been brought up. ’Can-do’ Imelda—ism went several unacceptable steps further.
Mrs Marcos has frequently been derided for having too easily fallen beneath the spell of intellectual 'mentors' with their own agendas (such as Dr Jolly Benitez) and becoming prey to any passing fashionable idea that takes her fancy. Strong men have testified to feeling faint at the prospect of one of her interminable lectures about Circles of Life or holes in the sky. Lifelong insomniaics have found the precious balm of sleep at last descending during one of M'am’s explanations of intuitive intelligence or the Filipino ideology, though courtesy has obliged them to shake it off. From time to time when the mood was on her Mrs Marcos would hijack Cabinet meetings, haranguing a long table ringed with glared ministers, each carrying on a bitter interior monologue. It was not unlike being invited to dinner in London in the seventies and finding oneself seated for the duration next to someone who had recently undergone an intellectual epiphany after reading Robert Pirsig or Edward de Bono. One knew one was in for some revelations about motorcycles or practical thinking more banal even than the inevitable quiche lorraine biding its time in the kitchen. At equivalent moments with Madame Marcos, hers was the implacable earnestness of the auto-didact. Ironically – for she would doubtless consider herself at such times as being at her most exalted and visionary – these bouts of duty theorizing represent Imelda almost at her worst. This is because her major talents for spontaneity, warmth and humour temporarily desert her. She ploughs on with a discourse manifestly not her own, a spiel she has learned by rote. She becomes unstoppable, charmless, boring. Too many years of too many people suppressing their own intelligence through fear or good manners have led to her holding forth with impunity, when what she badly needed was for someone to have the courage to stand up and say ‘Oh, for heaven’s sake, this is just gobbledygook! Talk sense!’ But nobody ever did; and the result is that people have increasingly come to think of her as roughly one-third mad. This is a pity, because she isn’t. Like others of her class, her problem is partly that she has too seldom kept proper company, meaning unbeholden and disciplined intellects. There is an irony here: in that unlike her husband, Imelda did to some extent surround herself with representatives of the liberal arts; not merely the Van Cliburns of the world stage but educated and bright Filipinos like Jolly Benitez as well as writers, artists, musicians and dancers.
no amount of dollars earned seems to make up for the splitting, for
the crucial absence of a father or a mother and sometimes even
both. Just occasionally, I have thought, it is possible to regard the
entire country as a broken family, as though to explain a certain
ingrained despair, a fleeting sense of moral delinquency, a chronic
lack of leadership. According to this conceit the Philippines-as
household has indeed endured a succession of strange men—includ-
ing a king, an emperor, several presidents and a homeboy
borderline dictator—all of whom barged in, dallied for a while,
swore undying love, protested total commitment to their children
and drifted away again, their pockets jingling. In this casual,
broken paradigm, Imelda’s vision of herself as being not only a
mother but her country’s mother is maybe not so ludicrous after all.
Many people might protest that she herself hardly merits such a
self-proposed title; but the fact that she intuited such a role as rep-
resenting a national psychic need does have a certain bizarre
validity. At the very least it calls to mind some peculiar emotional
damage, behind which lurks her nation’s traumatic rejection of
‘Mother Spain’ in the Revolution of 1898 as well as the more gen-
eral obsession with mothers characteristic of this intensely Catholic
and matrilineal society. More immediate to Imelda might be the
emotional consequences of her own divided childhood, of her
father’s second marriage, of the infante mother she half identified
with and half repudiated.

Some may feel that I have gone on too long—even too admiringly—
about Imelda Marcos, who is after all not a person I know beyond
a six-hour acquaintance and to whom I owe nothing other than
that and half an excellent roast fowl. Yet in her extravagant and
complex character, in her wounded past and her naive sincerity, she
expresses to an almost painful degree so much that I have seen in
Kansuyal over the last seventeen years. It seems absurd to imply
that there could ever be the remotest link between those famous
shopping sprees to Van Cleef & Arpels followed by dinner for the
glitterati in one of her New York properties, and an evening in a
clearing surrounded by bamboo huts where people drunkenly sing
their hearts out to the accompaniment of a plywood guitar and
edge-blown leaves. Yet there is something in common between
Manhattan and Kansuyal after all: a way of dealing with history,
the pretense of a cure for longing, the concealing smile. I think
there will come a time when Filipinos will learn to appreciate their
own creative genius in inventing Imelda Marcos to express them-

# First Couple redux

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