

Speech of Rufino S. Ignacio to World Affairs Council -- March 13, 2004
Panorama City, Olympia, Washington

Topic: *Notes on the History of the Philippines and Culture of Filipinos including a short Discourse on Philippine-American Relations*

Our esteemed Guest of Honor Lieutenant-General Eduard Soriano, President David Markham, distinguished members of the World Affairs Council in Olympia, beloved members of the Filipino American Community, respected guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

First of all I would like to thank David for his introduction. With a voice like that, he should be on Broadway. I felt good listening to him.

Let me start with a short story:

A teacher of a third-grade Sunday school class was planning to take her little ones on a field trip to the ongoing church service so they could get an idea of what morning worship looked like. Before they left their classroom, she thought it would be good to caution them against being loud and noisy in those surroundings.

Attempting to engage their attention, she asked, "Class, why do we need to be quiet in church?" One bright little kid replied right away, "Ma'am, we have to keep quiet in church because people are sleeping in there."

So, please, Ladies and gentlemen, be quiet because people will soon be sleeping here with my speech. I do not wish them disturbed."

My subject today is about the Philippines -- some notes on the history of the nation, and the culture of its people. I will also touch on contemporary Philippine-American relations. It is rather a long subject and I could talk here for hours. The real challenge is to do it in 25 minutes or so. But with our beloved General Soriano in the audience, I have no choice but to follow orders on the 30-minute limit. I don't want to be sent to Iraq.

Ah, the Philippines, my native land, the place of my birth. It is always a delight to talk about her. The saying, "you can take a Filipino away from the Philippines, but never the Philippines away from a Filipino." I think it still rings a bell with most of my *kababayans* in the audience tonight.

But of course, America is our new country. Despite years of trials when I first came as immigrant, everyday when I wake up in the morning I say, "Thank you Lord, I'm here in America. I am fortunate than most who only dream of stepping ashore in this country. I have a great job. I have a home. I have a good new life here with my family. Please bless this country."

I hope you don't mind a short narration of my life in America. And this will not be included in my 30 minutes. Okay, General?

Our immigration to this country, crossing the Pacific Ocean, with my wife and four children, all together in one plane in 1986, was a bold decision indeed, a big leap to a world that I did not know fully except its promise of a brighter future. From the window of the airplane, looking out into the vast emptiness of space, I was reminded of the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore in his poems Gitanjali, "What emptiness do you gaze upon! Do you not feel a thrill passing through the air with the notes of the far away song floating from the other shore?" The beauty of the dream of America tantalized me no end.

However, in due time, the moment of truth dawned upon me. Starting all over in America was my toughest challenge -- emotionally, financially and physically. My initial mistake was trying to live my life one foot in America and one foot in the Philippines. I re-lived in memory my past glories in the Philippines, my happiness with relatives and friends. The reverie did not bring me any farther.

In the Philippines, after graduation from the premier University of the Philippines, I never had to find work -- work sought for me. When I arrived in America, for the first time in my life, I had to find work. Nobody knew me, and it was not easy finding a job at my age. I experienced rudeness, heard aspersions of trying to communicate in American English (mine was Filipino English). I had fits of loneliness and despair. I entertained the thought of giving up and returning to the Philippines. But how could I when there was a family to feed?

The anticipation that instant success could be achieved in America created additional pressure. Meantime, my kids were in public school, not in the exclusive Ateneo and Saint Scholastica in Manila. However, much to my surprise, the kids adjusted very well compared to an old bone like me. My wife, who loves to shop in the supermarket for discount items, started to enjoy living in America too.

I had to make big changes in the way I thought and acted. My modesty and humility was misconstrued as weakness, an inferiority. I realized that even with majority of Americans being kind, there are bad ones, too; that some people have so much material possessions, while others are homeless; many are overweight while others have nothing to eat. That life in America is not as organized as I thought. There's so much wastage of resources. There were more questions than answers.

I realized I had to start all over...to revitalize my career, change my attitude, and shift my perception and reaction to things and people around me. In short, I had to feel and act like an American, to be in the mainstream. I had to be frank and assertive of my wants, as opposed to being polite always. I learned to say No instead of saying Yes all the time just to satisfy the other fellow.

With time, everyone in the family adapted to our new environs. I planted both feet in America. In-between work I earned my second master's degree. I wrote a technical book. Eventually, my wife and I found satisfying jobs that harness our potentials. We made new friends. The kids graduated from the university. The years of discouragement were gone. Questions of doubt about the decision to immigrate have long vanished.

No country is perfect, including America. However, America is still the country where an individual can achieve the impossible. It remains the beacon for generations to beat the odds, to achieve success despite the hurdles.

So after 18 years, we are okay. All four children are professionals -- the eldest son is a retired Microsoft millionaire-philanthropist at age 32, he will enter e graduate school this Fall; one is a Boeing-Honeywell engineer, and the other two are carving their own destinies in science and humanities.

I say thank you America.

Let's move on to our topic tonight. The Philippines, yes, the Philippines. It is an interesting, lively, perplexing country, where people are patient, forbearing, forgiving, hospitable, and God-loving despite continuing tests to its nationhood.

The Philippines is situated north of the Equator, across the Pacific Ocean from us. It is an archipelago of more than 7,000 tropical islands where palm trees sway. The exotic sand beaches are picturesque. The water is warm the whole year round unlike the beaches of Puget Sound that is cold all the time.

The country's immediate neighbor on the north is Taiwan across the Philippine Sea, on the west are Vietnam and Thailand across South China Sea, and southwest are Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia across the Sulu and Celebes seas. The Philippines is also known as Pearl of the Orient Seas, and The Only Christian Nation in Asia.

The Philippines has an area of 117,000 sq miles compared to Washington State of 66,544 sq miles. The Philippines is almost double the size of Washington. However, it is populated by 84 million inhabitants compared to our state of only 6 million, or 14 times as many people. It is very crowded indeed particularly in the big cities. Population growth is a real problem. There are recent talks about limiting children to only two per family, much to the chagrin of the Catholic Church, to whom some 85% of the population belongs.

45% of the labor force is in agriculture, 15% in industry, and 40% in services.

Because of its island nature, the Philippines has an irregular coastline twice as long as that of continental USA. The Philippines is composed of different ethnic groups, the largest of which are the Tagalogs, Ilocanos, Kapampangan, Pangasinan, Visayans, and others. The Philippines

has over 60 cultural minorities who maintain their age-old and distinct culture. The Filipinos speak at least eight indigenous languages, subdivided among 87 dialects. In two provinces near Manila -- cross a river from Bulacan, a Tagalog province, and you will be in Pampanga, another ethnic group of entirely different language, customs and traditions.

Compare the Philippines with vast Canada, where there are only two principal languages, French and English, and the other half even wants to secede.

In my bachelor years, having come from the North and Marlene, my future wife from the South, we would write letters in English, the language taught in school. I did not know Visayan, she was not as good in Tagalog. So English was the medium. Later, she learned Tagalog, the language of common use. But of course, she had to, because she did not want to lose me.

I don't know, but somehow Tagalog or Visayan, is more romantic and titillating than English. Something *is lost in translation* when I say I love you, instead of, *Iniibig kita* in Tagalog or *Gihugugma kita* in Visayan or *Inaro taka* in Pangasinan.

The first inhabitants of the Philippines, millenniums ago, came from Malaya and Indonesia rowing their tribal boats called *barangays* north to the islands. They settled in the islands, had active trade and cultural interchange with their neighbors as far as Siam (Thailand), Moluccas, China and the whole of Asia for that matter.

Important to know -- Islam, the Muslim religion was first introduced in the Philippines in the 1300s by missionaries and traders from Arabia. Islam was then widely established in Indonesia, Malaya and Borneo. It was spreading in southern Philippines, towards the north in Luzon. Manila was an old Muslim enclave under the rule of Rajah Sulayman.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, in the 1500s, Spain felt a mandate from God to catholicize the world after its triumphs over the Muslim Moors who occupied southern Spain for centuries. Spanish armadas sailed the Atlantic to the Americas, and then on to the vast Pacific and the Philippines.

Ferdinand Magellan was the first Spanish officer to set foot on the islands. That was in 1521, almost 200 years after the Muslims arrived. Magellan was leading an expedition across the seas to discover the western route to the East. He docked in Cebu and named the islands Philippines after King Philip of Spain. He claimed it for the Empire. That was how they did it in those times -- frighten the natives with their technology and military might, cannons and all, and boom, the land was all theirs.

Unfortunately Magellan got involved in an internal conflict between neighboring chieftains. He was killed by the recalcitrant chieftain Lapu-lapu. It was unfortunate because Magellan was almost successful in circumnavigating the world when the tragedy struck. However, his comrades continued with the voyage and returned to Spain via East, thus were first to go around

the world. News about the travels of Magellan spread far and wide in Europe. Successive expeditions soon sailed out to the East.

Spain returned to the Philippines forty years later in 1565. Spain cut off the spread of Islam in the Philippines. The war against the Muslim Moors in Spain had its repeat battles in the new colony. The age-old antagonism between Christians and Muslims was carried over to the Philippines.

However, in the present form of Christian – Muslim conflict in the Philippines, and believe me, Ladies and Gentlemen, because I was, before coming to America, Vice President of a state university in the Philippines in a Muslim region, it is not religion strictly that is at odds. It is the disparity and chasm in the socio-economic, political and cultural status between Muslims and Christians. The Muslims are the poorer lot -- they have always been, and still are in the periphery of mainstream development.

Spain colonized the Philippines from 1565 until 1898 for more than three centuries.

The religious orders baptized the natives and changed their names. And so my name is Rufino Ignacio, named possibly after saints Rufus and Ignatius de Loyola. I should have been called, *Magandang Lalakiin* the original Tagalog, meaning Handsome Guy.

But Spain was not only focused on her religious mandate. She was equally, if not more, interested in conquests and in spices such as pepper, ginger, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg and other food flavorings that Southeast Asia was noted for. These spices were equivalent of their weight in gold in Europe.

Huge ships or *galleons* sailed the oceans to trade spices, gold, silk, silver, tobacco and other products between the Philippines, Asia and Europe. Manila was a major principal port of call. Those were glorious times when Spain was the superpower in the world similar to America today. She was at its peak in commerce, military, arts, culture, and technology. Being a colony, the Philippines was a beneficiary of such glory. Riches flowed to Manila, Cebu, Iloilo, Ilocandia with monopolies of sugar and tobacco.

Spain influenced Philippine life with her religion, arts, engineering, agriculture, law and religious education. The University of Santo Tomas, established by the Dominicans, is older than Harvard University in the USA. In music, for example, observe how Filipinos of today can hit the very high notes (*ha, ha, ha, ha, ha*), particularly in our *kundimans* and popular songs, compared to other Asians. This was a carry-over of arias of operas from Europe that elite Filipinos were exposed to.

However, Spain's accomplishment in public education, elementary and secondary was minimal. The colonialists were elitist in education trying to preserve the existing order. They did not even

teach the greater mass of people the Spanish language unlike Mexico and the rest of Latin America. It was a blessing in disguise because Filipinos did not lose their indigenous languages.

Filipinos, after years of oppression revolted and proclaimed a republic on June 12, 1898. However, by twist of fate, the Spanish-American war broke out in the Western hemisphere. The Philippines, being a colony of Spain, got entangled in that war. The United States eventually took over where Spain left off. The Yankees had arrived in Asia. The US paid \$ 20 million to Spain for the Philippines.

With the Philippine republic forestalled, the change of colonial masters ignited the Philippine-American war in 1898 and continued for some four years. With its war technology, the US prevailed after thousands died on both sides.

In the short 48 years between 1898 to 1946, the US introduced massive public education; taught Filipinos a new language, English; made progress in public health battling plagues and diseases; water and sewage systems; governance; technology and higher education. Infrastructures were built. Universities, including the University of the Philippines, were opened. Exchange scholars were sent to the US. The military, teachers and missionaries came in droves. Marlene's great grandfather arrived with the military in early 1900. He liked it there so much that he grew a family. He did not return anymore to the USA. Good for us for because that was the basis many years later of our immigrant visas to the USA.

Whereas, ordinary people did not attend school during the Spanish regime, Americans required children to be in school. Children were apprehended on the streets and were brought to schools. American teachers came with their books about white Christmas, apples and grapes, Aesop fables, Cinderella and the like. The Charleston and swing replaced the elegant balze, rigodon and fandango. Movies blazed the screen. The Spanish zarzuelas on stage were gone. Traditional families resisted the cultural intrusion but soon gave up. Hollywood was just too much to resist. The Castilian heritage of cavalier grace and elegance gave way to American practicality and innovation.

But as history would have it, Filipinos longed to govern themselves, they wanted to be free. America promised independence by 1946. However, before that could happen, the two countries had to fight valiantly together WW II against Japan. After the devastating war, independence, long delayed by some fifty years, was granted on July 4, 1946.

Let me emphasize --- the Philippines was under America when America was beginning its adventure in internationalism, in its virgin experience to become a superpower, when idealism in America was at its most sublime to play a major role in the world, to spread its message of liberty, and freedom and justice for all. For many of Tom Brokaw's *Greatest Generation*, they summoned their greatness in various arenas in the Philippines -- Howard Taft, McArthur, Eisenhower and the like. And through it all, Filipinos were eager learners and partners to their brother Americans.

Through thick and thin, America and the Philippines have remained faithful friends, always finding solutions to irritants in relationship in trade, commerce, foreign aid, defense, politics and others. The two countries march to the same beat for democracy and progress, and in their fight against common enemies. They were together in the Second World War, the Cold War, in Korea, in Vietnam, and now in the war against global terrorism.

Today, the Philippines is a thriving economy. The US is its Number 1 importer, absorbing 26% of its exports. The Philippines in return buys 19% (second to Japan) of its imports from the USA. A majority of Filipinos can read, write and speak English. There is a huge pool of skilled and highly trained technical manpower. All these plus its Hollywood-style politics make for an electric and engaging atmosphere. Visit the Philippines and bathe in the excitement of a country in dynamic remake.

The Philippines will hold its presidential and senatorial elections in May this year. Not to be outdone by California, the leading candidate for President is the country's top action star, Fernando Poe, Jr. And he might win, too.

The press is wild and raucous, more hard hitting than the US. Freedom of the press is a precious commodity. Patterned after the US, there are three branches of government, the Executive, the Legislature, and the Courts. There is no jury system to dispense of swift justice. Postponements of trial hearings are a norm. It is not surprising that a simple case of embezzlement would run for years.

I am reminded of a story of a grandchild in an inheritance case. A new judge was appointed to the sala. A grandmother complained about the case, and the new judge boasted, "I am a hardworking, efficient judge, there will be no hearing postponements in my sala. Come on Grandma, please bring to my court your grandchild." And the old lady said, "But your honor, I was the grandchild in this case...."...

Ladies and gentlemen, this speech is getting rather long. Please maintain your silence so that those already sleeping will not be disturbed.

For those still awake, do not sleep yet. Light up to some observations about Filipinos, including Filipino Americans that somehow define some of us. I choose only 10 from many. I will follow, who is that fellow, David Letterman:

1. Attend a Filipino party, even here in Olympia, and be surprised by the amount of food on the table. For guests of fifty, the host will prepare for 200. Why is this so? Because the host doesn't want to be *mapahiya*, or to lose face in case the food runs short. To be *mapahiya* is second to sudden death. But don't worry about excess food; it will be "finished" because there are Ziplocs aplenty for guests to take home food after the party. Ziplocs to go are part of the menu.

2. Attend a Filipino party and watch everyone talk, all at the same time. I don't know how we manage to understand each other. We talk, we giggle, we laugh, we sing, we dance, all at the same time. *Susmariosep*. In Korea, there are schools that teach people how to smile. In the Philippines there is no need for such schools because Filipinos are a natural with their smiles. Foreigners say the sweetest smiles in the world, come hell or high water, belong to Filipinos. During People Power that toppled Marcos, Filipinos confronted machine guns and tanks with flowers and smile on their lips. Look at me, this is the classic Filipino smile. It's so easy to make us laugh, to make us happy. High blood pressure is not for Filipinos.
3. If you want to begin a program at 8 'clock, announce it will start at 7 o'clock, because it's only around 7:30 that the audience will arrive. So often, one would ask, "Is this American or Filipino time?" Well, being late by one hour still is a vast improvement from past practices of *manana* or "Thine will be done tomorrow". I will finish this job at 3 pm meant 3 AM of the next day in the *manana* clock.
4. Filipinos are by nature very hospitable. Sociologists are at a lost where Filipinos acquired this trait. Visit a Filipino home, invited or not, any hour of the day, and they will feed you no end. And they would even say, when you could hardly breathe with the food taken, "Sorry, ha, that is all we can serve you. *Nakakahiya naman sa iyo*." Try lodging for a day or two, and they will give you the master's bedroom, service galore.
5. On cuisine, yes, its pancit (noodles), lumpia (egg roll) and adobo as norm, and hundred other dishes. And did you know, Filipinos have *viagra* for ages as food. Try eating *balut*. It is fertilized duck egg, 21 days on incubation, about ready to hatch. It is boiled to perfection, and ready to eat -- head, feathers and all, ulk...but hey, it's a great aphrodisiac. Wonder why they sell them only at night. I brought some samples, here; if you wish to try, ready to eat. If you will *balut* tonight, I will give you free membership to our Filipino American association here in Olympia. *Balut* is in Mr. Ripley's book Believe It or Not.
6. On technology, I read that the fluorescent bulb, the *karaoke*, the moon buggy were products of Filipino ingenuity. Remember years ago, the *I love you* virus that hit the world's computers? That too was "invented" by a young student in Manila. I learned Bill Gates is interested to hire the chap after he gets out of prison.
7. The Miranda law in the USA had its origins in the Philippines, the one that says... "you have the right to remain silent...to an attorney, etc..etc...and all that jazz." In fact, the provision is imbedded in our constitution.
8. I was surprised that during the Oscar awards Sofia Coppola was the first American woman to be nominated as best director. In the Philippines, there have been women

winner in the local Oscar. Senator Hillary Clinton may be dreaming of becoming the first woman president of the US. The Philippines already had two, the present Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, and years back, Cory Aquino.

9. Shhhh, top secret, Filipino homes are managed and run by women. The husband, for public consumption, is the boss. Here is what happens: the husband brings home the salary, gives it all to his wife, whereupon she gives him allowance for the week. Well, not exactly a raw deal...because as husbands, we get streamlined home management -- the kids are well fed, dressed, tutored, bills are paid on time. Husbands are given free rein on TV programs; prepared warm, delicious food on the table. All these with savings to spare. My wife Marlene would not even let me touch the dish and the clothes washer and dryer. If the husband's salary is not enough, then the wife works, too. Ah, what a life.....
10. Have you been to Seatac airport and watched Filipino-Americans leaving for visit to the Philippines? A normal scenario is a fellow with separate weighed-in two *balikbayan* boxes as huge as container vans. In his two arms are bulging large luggages. All these are full of *pasalubongs* (goodies) for relatives and friends in the Philippines. Often, the poor guy doesn't even have room for his own personal belongings. Though it hurts the wallet, the *pasalubong* is one tradition we treasure, particularly for those on the receiving end. Just make sure nobody is left out on the *pasalubongs*, or feelings will be hurt.

There are many more observations, but let me stop and finish my talk.

The primary US concern nowadays is for the Philippines to be a strong ally in the war against terrorism. In geopolitics, the Philippines is of strategic importance in this war. In its southern backdoor lies Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim nation of 180 million. The Bali bombing in Indonesia targeted Western peoples. Malaysia and Brunei are Muslim-dominated and, not to their liking, are suspected to be incubators of terrorist movements like the Jemaah Al Islamiyah. These groups are identified as having close ties with Al Qaeda. President Bush mentioned this in his speeches.

The US has a large stake in seeing the Philippines succeed because it is an oasis in a region that is increasingly becoming hostile to America. The US interest is therefore served by a Philippines that is stable with its economy, politics, education, and military.

The Philippines has resilient and optimistic people caught at times in transient turmoil of governance. The country actively vies for more massive infusion of investments and economic assistance from the US. While Israel and Egypt receive huge sums of aid, including concessions on their international debts, the Philippines receives comparatively very little on foreign aid and debt concessions. And yet the Philippines is in a crucial position, a chokepoint to the region, a sentinel and gateway to Asia. It is a unique jump-off point to Australia, New Zealand the South Pacific.

The Philippine educational system has fallen so far behind in government support. Money was being used by the military instead of schools and universities. A well-educated populace is a guarantee against the inroads of terrorism that feeds on poverty and ignorance. The US should therefore include educational development in its foreign aid to the Philippines. This could be done through scholarship grants, instructional equipment, books, exchange programs for faculty, assistance to colleges and universities, and loan guarantees for elementary and high schools. The US should consider education and the military on the same footing in foreign aid allocation. If the US is doing it for Iraq and other countries, it can do the same for the Philippines, its most steadfast ally in the Pacific and possibly in the world.

I will conclude my speech by quoting President George W. Bush when he welcomed Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo in the White House last year with these words, “ “The Philippines was the first democracy in Asia and has a proud tradition of democratic values, love of family and faith in God. President Arroyo, you are carrying this tradition forward, and I’m proud to call you friend...Mabuhay!” No US President has ever proclaimed such accepted historical truth in those eight words: “The Philippines was the first democracy in Asia...”.

The red-carpet reception for President Gloria Arroyo was followed by the recent visit of President and Mrs. Bush to Manila. President George Bush has taken concrete steps to the continuing constructive mutual respect between the two countries. Filipinos and Americans shall never forget their history as they prepare to build for a lasting future. May our mutual “*utang na loob sa isa’t-isa*”, our debt of gratitude for one another, never end.

Have a great evening. Good bye for now.