

President Corazon Aquino's Speech before the Joint Session of the U.S Congress

Three years ago I left America in grief, to bury my husband, Ninoy Aquino. I thought I had left it also, to lay to rest his restless dream of Philippine freedom. Today, I have returned as the President of a free people.

In burying Ninoy, a whole nation honored him by that brave and selfless act of giving honor to a nation in shame recovered its own. A country that had lost faith in its future, founded in a faithless and brazen act of murder. So, in giving we receive, in losing we find, and out of defeat we snatched our victory. For the nation, Ninoy became the pleasing sacrifice that answered their prayers for freedom.

For myself and our children, Ninoy was a loving husband and father. His loss, three times in our lives was always a deep and painful one. Fourteen years ago this month, was the first time we lost him. A president-turned-dictator and traitor to his oath, suspended the constitution and shutdown the Congress that was much like this one before which I'm honored to speak. He detained my husband along with thousands of others - Senators, publishers, and anyone who had spoken up for the democracy as its end drew near. But for Ninoy, a long and cruel ordeal was reserved. The dictator already knew that Ninoy was not a body merely to be imprisoned but a spirit he must break. For even as the dictatorship demolished one-by-one; the institutions of democracy, the press, the congress, the independence of a judiciary, the protection of the Bill of Rights, Ninoy kept their spirit alive in himself.

The government sought to break him by indignities and terror. They locked him up in a tiny, nearly airless cell in a military camp in the north. They stripped him naked and held a threat of a sudden midnight execution over his head. Ninoy held up manfully under all of it. I barely did as well. For forty-three days, the authorities would not tell me what had happened to him. This was the first time my children and I felt we had lost him.

When that didn't work, they put him on trial for subversion, murder and a host of other crimes before a military commission. Ninoy challenged its authority and went on a fast. If he survived it, then he felt God intended him for another fate. We had lost him again. For nothing would hold him back from his determination to see his fast through to the end. He stopped only when it dawned on him that the government would keep his body alive after the fast had destroyed his brain. And so, with barely any life in his body, he called off the fast on the 40th day. God meant him for other things, he felt. He did not know that an early death would still be

his fate, that only the timing was wrong. At any time during his long ordeal, Ninoy could have made a separate peace with a dictatorship as so many of his countrymen had done. But the spirit of democracy that inheres in our race and animates this chamber could not be allowed to die. He held out in the loneliness of his cell and the frustration of exile, the democratic alternative to the insatiable greed and mindless cruelty of the right and the purging holocaust of the left.

And then, we lost him irrevocably and more painfully than in the past. The news came to us in Boston. It had to be after the three happiest years of our lives together. **But his death was my country's resurrection and the courage and faith by which alone they could be free again.** The dictator had called him a nobody. Yet, two million people threw aside their passivity and fear and escorted him to his grave.

And so began the revolution that has brought me to democracy's most famous home, The Congress of the United States.

The task had fallen on my shoulders, to continue offering the democratic alternative to our people. Archibald Macleish had said that democracy must be defended by arms when it is attacked by arms, and with truth when it is attacked by lies. He failed to say how it shall be won. *I held fast to Ninoy's conviction that it must be by the ways of democracy.* I held out for participation in the 1984 election the dictatorship called, even if I knew it would be rigged. I was warned by the lawyers of the opposition, that I ran the grave risk of legitimizing the foregone results of elections that were clearly going to be fraudulent. But I was not fighting for lawyers but for the people in whose intelligence, I had implicit faith. By the exercise of democracy even in a dictatorship, they would be prepared for democracy when it came. And then also, it was the only way I knew by which we could measure our power even in the terms dictated by the dictatorship. The people vindicated me in an election shamefully marked by government thuggery and fraud. The opposition swept the elections, garnering a clear majority of the votes even if they ended up (thanks to a corrupt Commission on Elections) with barely a third of the seats in Parliament. Now, I knew our power.

Last year, in an excess of arrogance, the dictatorship called for its doom in a snap election. The people obliged. With over a million signatures they drafted me to challenge the dictatorship. And I, obliged.

The rest is the history that dramatically unfolded on your television screens and across the front pages of your newspapers. You saw a nation armed with courage and integrity, stand fast

by democracy against threats and corruption. You saw women poll watchers break out in tears as armed goons crashed the polling places to steal the ballots. But just the same, they tied themselves to the ballot boxes. You saw a people so committed to the ways of democracy that they were prepared to give their lives for its pale imitation. At the end of the day before another wave of fraud could distort the results, I announced the people's victory.

Many of you here today played a part in changing the policy of your country towards ours. We, the Filipinos thank each of you for what you did. For balancing America's strategic interest against human concerns illuminates the American vision of the world. The co-chairman of the United States observer team, in his report to the President said, **"I was witness to an extraordinary manifestation of democracy on the part of the Filipino people. The ultimate result was the election of Mrs. Corazon Aquino as President and Mr. Salvador Laurel as Vice-President of the Philippines."**

When a subservient parliament announced my opponent's victory, the people then turned out in the streets and proclaimed me the President of all the people. And true to their word, when a handful of military leaders declared themselves against the dictatorship, the people rallied to their protection. Surely, the people take care of their own. It is on that faith and the obligation it entails that I assumed the Presidency.

As I came to power peacefully, so shall I keep it. That is my contract with my people and my commitment to God. He had willed that the blood drawn with a lash shall not in my country be paid by blood drawn by the sword but by the tearful joy of reconciliation. We have swept away absolute power by a limited revolution that respected the life and freedom of every Filipino.

Now, we are restoring full constitutional government. Again as we restore democracy by the ways of democracy, so are we completing the constitutional structures of our new democracy under a constitution that already gives full respect to the Bill of Rights. A jealously independent constitutional commission is completing its draft which will be submitted later this year to a popular referendum. When it is approved, there will be elections for both national and local positions. So, within about a year from a peaceful but national upheaval that overturned a dictatorship, we shall have returned to full constitutional government.

Given the polarization and breakdown we inherited, this is no small achievement. My predecessor set aside democracy to save it from a communist insurgency that numbered less than five hundred. Unhampered by respect for human rights he went at it with hammer and tongs. By the time he fled, that insurgency had grown to more than sixteen thousand. I think

there is a lesson here to be learned about trying to stifle a thing with a means by which it grows. I don't think anybody in or outside our country, concerned for a democratic and open Philippines doubts what must be done. Through political initiatives and local re-integration programs, we must seek to bring the insurgents down from the hills and by economic progress and justice, show them that which the best-intentioned among them fight. As president among my people, I will not betray the cause of peace by which I came to power. Yet, equally and again, no friend of Filipino democracy will challenge this. I will not stand by and allow an insurgent leadership to spurn our offer of peace and kill our young soldiers and threaten our new freedom.

Yet, I must explore the path of peace to the utmost. For at its end, whatever disappointment I meet there is the moral basis for laying down the Olive branch of peace and taking up the sword of war.

Still, should it come to that, I will not waiver from the course laid down by your great liberator.

"With malice towards none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us finish the work we are in to bind up the nation's wounds. To care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and for his orphans to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

Like Abraham Lincoln, I understand that force may be necessary before mercy. Like Lincoln, I don't relish it. Yet, I will do whatever it takes to defend the integrity and freedom of my country.

Finally may I turn to that other slavery, our twenty-six billion dollar foreign debt. I have said that we shall honor it. Yet, the means by which we shall be able to do so are kept from us. Many of the conditions imposed on the previous government that stole this debt, continue to be imposed on us who never benefited from it.

And no assistance or liberality commensurate with the calamity that was vested on us have been extended. Yet ours must have been the cheapest revolution ever. With little help from others, we Filipinos fulfilled the first and most difficult condition of the debt negotiation, the full restoration of democracy and responsible government. Elsewhere and in other times, a more stringent world economic conditions, marshal plans and their like were felt to be necessary companions of returning democracy.

When I met with President Reagan, we began an important dialogue about cooperation

and the strengthening of friendship between our two countries. That meeting was both a confirmation and a new beginning. I am sure it will lead to positive results in all areas of common concern. Today, we face the aspiration of a people who have known so much poverty and massive unemployment for the past 14 years. And yet offer their lives for the abstraction of democracy.

Wherever I went in the campaign, slum area or impoverished village. They came to me with one cry, DEMOCRACY. Not food although they clearly needed it but DEMOCRACY. Not work, although they surely wanted it but DEMOCRACY. Not money, for they gave what little they had to my campaign. They didn't expect me to work a miracle that would instantly put food into their mouths, clothes on their back, education in their children and give them work that will put dignity in their lives. But I feel the pressing obligation to respond quickly as the leader of the people so deserving of all these things.

We face a communist insurgency that feeds on economic deterioration even as we carry a great share of the free world defenses in the Pacific. These are only two of the many burdens my people carry even as they try to build a worthy and enduring house for their new democracy. That may serve as well as a redoubt for freedom in Asia. Yet, no sooner as one stone laid than two are taken away. Half our export earnings, two billion dollars out of four billion dollars which is all we can earn in the restrictive market of the world, must go to pay just the interest on a debt whose benefit the Filipino people never received.

Still we fought for honor and if only for honor, we shall pay. And yet, should we have to ring the payments from the sweat of our men's faces and sink all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two-hundred fifty years of unrequited toil. Yet, to all Americans, as the leader to a proud and free people, I address this question, "Has there been a greater test of national commitment to the ideals you hold dear than that my people have gone through? You have spent many lives and much treasure to bring freedom to many lands that were reluctant to receive it. And here, you have a people who want it by themselves and need only the help to preserve it."

Three years ago I said, Thank you America for the haven from oppression and the home you gave Ninoy, myself and our children and for the three happiest years of our lives together. Today I say, join us America as we build a new home for democracy; another haven for the oppressed so it may stand as a shining testament of our two nations' commitment to freedom.