

**RECOGNITION NIGHT IN CELEBRATION
OF THE 106TH PHILIPPINE INDEPENDENCE DAY
San Diego Ball Room, Marriott Hotel Marina, San Diego
13 June 2004**

Distinguished Guests,

Ms. Aurora Cudal
President of the Coalition of Pilipino-American Organizations (COPAO)

The Honorable Marciano A. Paynor, Jr.
Consul General of the Republic of the Philippines,

Mga Kababayan:

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am very happy to be with you here this evening, as we gather to remember the 106th Anniversary of the Declaration of Philippine Independence from Spain, as well as to recognize the contributions that have been made to promote the Filipino-American community and Philippine-American relations.

On June 12, 1898, one hundred and six years and one day ago, Filipino patriots announced the severance of their ties with the Spanish Empire. Their declaration opened the way to the eventual establishment of Asia's first republic based on a modern constitution and democratic principles.

Today, 106 years later, we remain proud of this achievement by our forbears. They proved that liberty and self-government are the birthright of all people, regardless of race, creed, or religion.

The liberators of our country risked their comfort, their safety, their fortunes and even their very lives. There was a magnificent generation that taught us all who came afterwards the lessons of selfless patriotism.

Ever since the first June 12, the Filipino people have kept faith with their democracy. The patriotic spirit that gave birth to Philippine Independence and that inspired the Filipino People to protect their liberty through the years, has continued down to our day.

Indeed, Filipinos have astounded the world with their dedication to freedom.

The First Filipino Peoples Power Revolution of 1986 toppled a dictatorship peacefully and restored democratic government. In 2001, a second peaceful revolution saved Philippine democracy again by removing a corrupt administration from office.

Last month, on May 10, Filipinos cast their votes in fair and free elections. While we await the official results of the national vote, we can see that Philippine democracy is alive and well.

As we celebrate this anniversary of Philippine Independence, we also recall the close historic ties between the Philippines and the United States. Our two countries have a long tradition of friendship built on the shared values of democracy, individual liberty, open societies and free enterprise.

Filipinos and Americans have stood together in every major conflict since World War Two. Last month, I was privileged to attend the inauguration of the World War Two Monument in Washington, D.C. The name of the Philippines and of battles involving the Philippines are inscribed on that monument, which stands as a permanent witness to the shared sacrifices of our two peoples.

I want to assure you that we will continue our campaign for our Filipino veterans of the Second World War. We appreciate what the Bush Administration has done for the US-based Filipino veterans, but we must press on to help the veterans in the Philippines as well.

The Philippine-American alliance is now at its strongest point in a decade. The unprecedented exchange of State Visits last year, by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, and by President George W. Bush, reflects this strength.

Under their leadership, we have enhanced almost every facet of our bilateral partnership.

In defense, we have increased cooperation, especially in counter-terrorism and against the Abu Sayyaf. We have embarked on what we call a Joint Defense Assessment, where our two militaries will collaborate in Philippine defense reform and modernization.

The Philippines has been designated a U.S. Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA), which will further facilitate defense cooperation.

To reinforce our peace process, the United States has pledged both diplomatic and financial assistance

In the development and education fields, we have increased cooperation, especially for Mindanao. The United States launched an education initiative last year, totaling \$33 million over six years, specifically for the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).

In addition, we have a special joint project to study how best to reduce the cost of remittances sent home by our kababayan overseas. This project could eventually lead to savings of \$500 million to \$1 billion a year, which could then be added to the remittance flows to the Philippines.

In foreign affairs, the Philippines and the United States are firm partners in the war on terror. We have worked together to promote regional security in the Asia-Pacific and to deepen international cooperation against terror in the United Nations.

The Philippines is part of the multinational coalition helping the people of Iraq to rebuild their country.

Our strongest bond, however, is between our peoples themselves. More than two-and-a-half Filipinos and Americans who count themselves of Filipino descent are today in the United States. Some 100,000 US citizens, meanwhile, live in the Philippines.

According to recent estimates, Filipinos constitute the second largest Asian-American group after the Chinese-Americans and the second largest foreign-born immigrant population following the Mexicans.

Moreover, Filipinos are excelling in all fields of endeavor, proving that the United States is a land of opportunity.

I am glad that all across the United States, Filipino organizations promote pride in our shared Filipino heritage by sponsoring social and educational activities that showcase Filipino culture and traditions.

Filipinos in the United States and, indeed, in other countries, are also active in helping their loved ones, as well as humanitarian and development projects, in the Philippines. This reflects what I would like to call a global bayanihan spirit, that Filipinos take with them wherever they may go.

I, therefore, am very happy to be here on this appreciation night, when we recognize these many contributions made by Filipino community organizations.

I am equally grateful to be present at this occasion when the Filipino community also recognizes the support it has received from the Honorable Members of the U.S. Congress for San Diego County.

We are privileged to count Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham, Rep. Susan Davis, Rep. Bob Filner, Rep. Duncan Hunter and Rep. Darrel Issa, as friends of the Filipino community, and as advocates of closer Philippine-American cooperation.

Let me take this special opportunity to thank all of our honorees for their helping the Filipino community, especially here in the San Diego area, and for supporting our causes, including the cause of our beloved Filipino veterans.

In this connection, the great State of California also deserves our gratitude for providing such a warm and welcoming home to the majority of Filipino-Americans living in the US today.

The US Congress is an important partner in maintaining strong relations between the Philippines and the United States. This is because the Philippines and the United States are more than simply allies. We are allied democracies. What binds us together is much deeper than temporary coalitions or strategic expedience.

The members of the Philippine and the United States congresses, as representatives of the people, have a vital role in shaping the course of our alliance. We must count on their support and vision as we move ahead.

One of the major initiatives taken was the organization of the US-Philippines Friendship Caucus in the US House of Representatives. Now composed of seventy-two members of the House, the Philippine Caucus symbolizes the enduring friendship between our people.

I am happy to relate to you that it was one of our honorees this evening, Rep. Darrel Issa, who had the original inspiration to launch the Philippine Caucus. He worked together with two other honorees, Rep. Bob Filner and Rep. "Duke" Cunningham, as well as with our other friends, to form the bipartisan Caucus. Furthermore, Rep. Issa provided the impetus to build the Caucus membership up to the significant force that it is now.

The birth of the Philippine Caucus is indeed a very special event. It is the first time that any such body has ever been formed for the Philippines in the US Congress. For this, we thank Rep. Issa for having been the guiding light behind its formation. He and his hardworking staff did the yeoman's work for its launch. Such understanding and support makes us even more confident that our relations with the United States will remain strong and vibrant in the years ahead.

I am, therefore, extremely pleased to announce that President Arroyo has herself recognized Rep. Issa, by conferring on him a national Philippine decoration, which is given to foreign nationals, including Ambassadors, who have made important contributions to our bilateral partnership.

I now have the distinct honor, in the name of President Arroyo, to bestow on Rep. Issa this decoration.

[REP. ISSA IS INVITED FORWARD]

[THE AMBASSADOR READS THE CITATION OF THE ORDER OF SIKATUNA, RANK OF DATU, AND CONFERS THE DECORATION ON REP. ISSA WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF THE PHILIPPINE CONSULATE GENERAL]

[THE AMBASSADOR AND REP. ISSA SHAKE HANDS AND POSE FOR PHOTOS IF APPROPRIATE]

[REP. ISSA RETURNS TO HIS SEAT]

Thank you all for your very kind attention.

Happy Independence Day!

Mabuhay!

END