

***“THE INSIDE TRACK”***

***Walking the corridors of power in Washington DC***

***By Ambassador Albert del Rosario***

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***(Speech addressed to the Graduating Class of the University of the Philippines’ School of Economics on April 20, 2007)***

**Upon arrival in Washington DC as a new envoy, I had to present a copy of my diplomatic credentials to the US Secretary of State prior to presenting the original document to the President of the United States. Secretary Colin Powell’s warm initial greeting was: “Mr. Ambassador, I would like you to know that City College of New York, is a better-looking institution than New York University where you graduated”. My response to him was he could very well be right, as I had to work at various jobs to afford night school, barely having time to appreciate much else.**

**Many are surprised to learn that Secretary Powell, one of the most respected leaders in modern America, achieved the highest military position of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff without having attended a US Military Academy and subsequently rose to the position of Secretary of State of the most the powerful nation in the world on the strength of a C+ average from a public educational institution.**

**Although I can think of no pleasure greater than to actually work in the field in which you are academically trained, in real life, options more often than not are limited. Years from now, will it matter that you may end up on a career path where your focused studies in economics may have no bearing? Whether you become an economist, a lawyer, an Indian chief, or decide to put up a plumbing business, what will matter is that you become exemplary at whatever you end up doing.**

**I graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Economics. My grades were mediocre. At age 26, in lieu of continuing in a management position with a multi-national organization in Manila, I decided to pursue an opportunity to become an insurance broker so as to be my own boss – a far cry from the study of Economics.**

**Starting a business presented many difficulties, including being critically short of meeting the financial requirements of my family. At age 28, while I was still struggling, the principal of the Ateneo urgently called me to a meeting as my son in prep was having serious problems. While in school, my poor little boy would suddenly blurt out, “My papa has no money”. With that traumatic episode, it was necessary to consider a career change or resolve to work as hard as I could to ensure financial security for the family. By persistence and by working day and night, ultimately the brokerage became successful enabling me to expand to other business interests.**

**And so, to my good fortune, I was able to learn early in life that stick-to-itiveness and working yourself to the bone can be a solution to overcoming future challenges.**

**I remained in the private sector for nearly four decades until, shortly after 9-11, President Arroyo asked if I would go to Washington. I arrived in DC three weeks before her first presidential visit to the US. In that short period of time, I lost 13 lbs in quickly learning the job and preparing for the visit. Subsequently, we fully focused on our US foreign policy to strengthen bilateral relations on all fronts to the furthest extent possible.**

**To provide effective leadership and to address my lack of skills and inexperience in diplomacy, I vowed to study and work harder than any ambassador that has ever occupied my position, to fight with all my might to promote and to defend Philippine interests, and to raise the bar for credible representation of the Philippines in the United States. With the support of President Arroyo, who put forth an effective foreign policy, and with the backing of Filipinos in America, our country team - which included 11**

**consulates - fully imposed upon ourselves a culture of reaching far beyond our grasp.**

**On the political front, we were able to successfully organize the first ever Philippine Friendship Caucus in the US House of Representatives consisting of 80 congressmen who provide assistance in helping us to advance Philippine interests.**

**On the defense and security front, we took advantage of the US policy on the war on terror by developing the first ever reform program for the AFP. We also began a transformation program for the PNP. For the FMF, which is the line item in the US budget for defense and security assistance, we achieved an improvement from 2001 to 2003 in the order of a 2,500 percent increase. Also, in the same period, development assistance, 2/3 of which goes to Mindanao, was increased to the extent of 250 percent per year.**

**In the area of the peace process, the US is providing diplomatic as well as funding assistance for the MILF peace process, but let me tell you a little story about this. A couple of years ago, there was a small news item on the possibility that Malaysia and the Philippines will try and move forward the peace process. Taking this press item to Congressman Todd Tiahrt, a close friend and one of the founders of our congressional caucus, I sat down with him and said "Mr. Congressman, we have one chance in a million here to do something that would be a win-win for both countries." This was the time when the US had invaded Iraq to get Saddam Hussein without funding, but there was a supplemental budget being prepared for the campaign, including a small foreign assistance provision. I mentioned to him that, at that time, there was concern that the US was taking its eye away from fighting terrorism, that in fact Saddam Hussein's link to the war and terror was not clearly established. I said this would be a good chance for us to partner in pursuing this peace process, hoping the initiative would be a victory for both the Philippines and the US.**

**He asked, "What are you looking for?" I said, "Mr. Congressman, I am looking for an amount of money which will fund livelihood,**

**basic services, human development, and the reintegration of the MILF into the mainstream. What we could do is offer this as a 'carrot and a stick'. If they do not accept this, we will use the fund to strengthen the military. He said, "You know that is a good idea. How much are you looking for?" I said, "Anywhere from \$30 million to \$40 million would be a good start."**

**The Congressman called me the next morning and said, "Mr. Ambassador, I liked your idea. I went on the floor of the Appropriations Committee and I said to them that the Ambassador of the Philippines spoke to me and this was his proposal." Then he said, "Congratulations, we approved your proposal. Now you have to get Senate approval."**

**Since we had many friends in the Senate led by Senators Inouye, Lugar, Cochran, Feinstein, and others, we were able to get the Senate on board within one week. When that bill came out from the US Congress, there was only one earmark, and that was for the MILF peace process. The Chairmen of both Appropriations Committees then called me and said, "That's all we can do for you, now you have to go and get Executive Branch approval."**

**We went to the State Department, and for the first time in my posting, I was admonished by the State Department for doing something I should not be doing, which is to tamper with the supplemental budget that was actually coming from President Bush's office. I received a strong warning that I would not succeed, and I should therefore stop what I was doing.**

**I left that office, recited many Hail Marys, and went directly to the White House. We sat down with the senior members of Condoleezza Rice's staff and I said, "This is our respectful proposal, we need this. Can you please remind the Secretary that we recently presented to her a framework for Mindanao?" We had prepared a simple framework that we would try to do three things together with the United States: We would endeavor to neutralize the Abu Sayyaf, we would improve the capabilities of the military, and we would try to do a peace process with the MILF whom we had problems with for the last 30 years.**

**They said, "We will take that up with Secretary Rice," which they did. That's how we were able to receive the US\$30 Million approved for the MILF Peace Process.**

**Then there was CalPERS, the largest pension fund in the US that yearly announces to the whole world, based on its detailed assessment, which emerging countries are considered as attractive investment locations. Let me tell you, for your amusement, what that story was really like. CalPERS had already written a preliminary report that the Philippines was being delisted. It was a formality for the Board to be able to confirm the delisting of the Philippines, since Manila had already given up.**

**I thought that we should go to CalPERS and persuade them not to delist us. A quick feedback we got was no one had ever challenged CalPERS at the level we were contemplating. I said, "Well, that does not matter. We will try to do this." The people at the embassy were asking, "What exactly is your strategy?" "It's an open meeting," I said, "we will go there and we will fight with them".**

**We immediately flew to San Francisco on a Saturday. Monday was the meeting in Sacramento, and I said we needed to have people; we need the US cavalry behind us. What constitutes the US cavalry? I said, "Let us get the Filipino-Americans to come with us." In addition to seeking the help of the FilAm leaders, I said, "Tonight we will visit every single association party. We will call up the priests in the parishes that say Mass for the Filipinos." I talked with all the priests and said, "Look, this is important for the country. Please gather the Filipinos. We will have buses waiting at the consulate on Monday morning."**

**Obviously that was a difficult thing to do because people go to work. But Monday morning, we had generated five busloads and with many others coming from all directions, we were able to pack the CalPERS auditorium in Sacramento. The Board was meeting at that time. They did not know what was going on. All**

**these people just came piling in and sitting down and someone asked, " Are these people going to have a party or something?"**

**As I was coming in, the Calpers' president, who ultimately became a good friend, was putting a motion to the table to confirm the delisting of the Philippines. I am out there in the aisle, jumping up and down, waiting to be recognized and obviously he did not see me. Finally, Willy Brown (former mayor of San Francisco) said, "I think that is the ambassador and he wants to say something." Having been recognized by the president, I hurriedly got up there and said, "Mr. Chairman, I am really awed by the power and the influence of this Board, that by simply one resolution, you can delist the Philippines thereby prejudicing the lives of 84 million people. If you are going to do this, I think it is your responsibility to listen to me on what we did to make the grade."**

**He allowed me to do that and we argued for over an hour. Of course the Filipino-Americans were both vocal and proactive. At one point, I thought there would be chaos when the chair had a problem restoring order. Finally, I think we made such a pest of ourselves, they ultimately said, "Okay, we give you one month to prove your case."**

**We walked out of there, having opened a small window. As soon as we got back to the office, I assembled the team and started working. Two days later I was called by the Palace, saying that they are sending reinforcements because I had embarrassed the Philippines at that meeting." With due respect," I responded, "we do not know what the outcome of this is going to be, but if you wish to send people, go ahead, but please ask them not to interfere with us."**

**What we did was we went to third party sources which included E-Standard Forum, Standard and Poor, Oxford Analytica, Heritage and so on, and we explained our position with respect to the factors that we were managing. During all this time, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *LA Times* and other press agencies**

**were closely following our progress with keen interest, which we found encouraging.**

**I chased the Board members who were in various cities in different states and sat down with them on a one-on-one basis to explain our findings. I did not know what the outcome would be, so on the 30th day, we again brought a group of nearly 500 Filipino Americans. This time they all wanted to come. I walked in there with thick files, ready to argue the whole day. I was sitting there, thinking how we could win this, when, to my relief, the secretary of the board came over to say, "Congratulations, you have already succeeded in accomplishing your mission".**

**Since then, the Embassy took it upon itself to be responsible for CaLPERS. In the succeeding year, due to political demonstrations with folks being hosed down in Manila, I received another call from the Palace instructing us to go to CaLPERS with a whole group of Filipino Americans again to dissuade CaLPERS from downgrading the Philippines. I replied, "we cannot do that twice because CaLPERS are going to wait for us with their own fire hoses." And so I said, "just leave it to us".**

**We did not tell them that all year round we had been working with third party sources. To the surprise of President Arroyo, the Philippines received the highest grade it had ever achieved, by surpassing Malaysia, India, Russia, and China.**

**With these stories, I simply wanted to impart that if you are fighting for your country, never accept defeat. Go to war if you must.**

**As the RP-US relations now stand, both countries are one in taking the position that the partnership has achieved a level of maturity; that it is strong, stable, robust, and resilient.**

**At the time I was being recalled after a five year posting, our team in DC had received an unexpected gift from the Heritage Foundation – the most notable conservative think-tank group in Washington, DC – when they described the Philippine Embassy as**

**“ very good in performance, having done an excellent job in representing the Philippines”. Heritage additionally pointed out how much money the embassy had generated for the Philippines when foreign aid was not popular due to the US level of spending at home and abroad. They observed that it was only through sheer hard work that the unexpected levels of assistance were able to be obtained. It also believed that, without the hard work of the embassy, the US would have long ago undertaken a program of reducing Philippine foreign assistance.**

**In looking back, we are most proud in having provided leadership in the only way we knew how – through example, through stick-to-itiveness, through hard work, through credible representation, through our economics background in pushing for economic diplomacy, through exploring options outside of the box, through selling our country from skills I learned in selling insurance, and through our collective passion to faithfully serve our country. At all times, we made sure we asked for the Lord’s guidance and, obviously, He was there every step of the way.**

**In considering public service, we need to debunk the belief that ambassadors have glamorous jobs. As you may now be able to conclude, it is far from that. To be totally transparent, I need to tell you as well that I was asked upon leaving Washington what my advice would be to my successor. After five years, my three-fold counsel was straightforward. My advice to the new Ambassador was first, do not go to Washington unless you truly love your country; second, expect to be going bankrupt because if your net worth is not dwindling, you must be doing something funny; and third, if you do decide to go to DC, bring a full sense of humor because you are going to need it.**

**Without equivocation, however, my most satisfying experience in life was to have served our country, especially in the company of our most dedicated professionals in the Foreign Service. I surmise that there are many others like them in government whose patriotism and zeal will prevail above all else.**



## **IMPORTANCE OF A PRO-ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP**

**Whatever it is that you decide to do, dear graduates, do it with a passion. Address also with the same passion, if you will, the revitalizing of your citizenship.**

**In revitalizing your citizenship, I urge you to please join the concerned and committed citizens in encouraging the national leadership to do what is right in four major areas of concern: First, to defend our democracy; second, to continue reforming our economy; third, to improve governance by addressing corruption and inequality; and fourth, to defeat terrorism and maintain peace and order.**

**In defending democracy, we need to ensure clean and credible elections; we need to keep the military from involvement in electioneering; and we need to address in a transparent manner the alleged human rights violations against journalists and political activists.**

**In continuing economic reforms - to create more jobs by attracting a higher level of investments - we need to improve infrastructure and productivity; we need to lower the cost of doing business and reduce red tape; and we need to have a working national policy on competitiveness. We moreover need more programs to cascade economic benefits to the countryside.**

**In improving governance, we need to address the problem of corruption by accelerating effective programs against smugglers and tax evaders. We need to apply the rule of law and establish that no one is above the law.**

**In addressing inequality, we need to invest more in the livelihood, education, and health of our people.**

**In fighting terrorism, we need to stay on course in reforming the AFP and the PNP. We need to finalize the peace process with the MILF to unleash the full potential of Mindanao.**

**Of equal importance, we need to encourage our national leadership to give more focus to execution, rather than rhetoric.**

**Even as the youth of today have been somewhat conspicuous by their silence, I hope that you will begin to speak out in defense of the voiceless and the marginalized. I hope that you will rise to the noble challenge of nation building. I ask you not to be afraid. I ask you to look within yourselves, to your loved ones, to your friends, to UP, to your faith, and to your country for the courage and fortitude you will need to advance the true concept of a proactive citizenship.**