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## Boone Schirmer on the Assassination of Aquino and Its Implications for the US and Marcos

Former Senator Benigno S. Aquino, Jr., the foremost leader of the opposition to the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines, was assassinated August 21, minutes after arriving at Manila International Airport following more than three years of exile in the US. Aquino was arrested in 1972 when Marcos declared martial law, thus ending 26 years of Philippine democracy. He spent the next 7½ years in prison, until he was released to come to the US for heart surgery.

Although he had a rewarding life here, living in Newton, MA with his wife and children while pursuing research fellowships at Harvard and MIT, he decided it was time for him to return to his native land to lead a nonviolent challenge to the Marcos regime. He was well aware of the risks he was incurring. His murder is linked by many observers and most Filipinos to Marcos, who strongly denies the allegation and has appointed a questionably independent commission to investigate the assassination.

The Reagan administration recently decided to give \$900 million in economic and military aid to the Marcos government, and Reagan plans to visit the Philippines in November.

Dr. Daniel Boone Schirmer, former professor of history at Boston University, was a close friend of Benigno Aquino and is an active member of Friends of the Filipino People. Schirmer is convinced that Ninoy Aquino, through his extensive information network in the Philippines, was acutely aware of the fate that awaited him in Manila. Besides their final conversation, during which Aquino spoke with an uncharacteristic solemnity and fatefulness just hours before boarding his plane, Dr. Schirmer cites some of the last words of Aquino to associates on the plane. He is reported to have told journalists traveling with him: "Now look, you fellows, you are going to have to be pretty sharp and quick. I am going to get off the plane and it's all going to be over in a matter of seconds."

A short while later, he turned to his brother-in-law, slowly put on his bulletproof vest and said, "If they shoot me in the chest it is okay, but if they snoot me in the head, I'm a goner." Schirmer concludes that Aquino's return to the Philippines was an act of "modern heroism"



Aquino (left) and Marcos.

that highlights "in all its high morality the absolute corruption and ferocity of the Marcos regime. Nothing has done that more effectively."

What motivated this man to return to his country knowing he risked not only his freedom but his life? Schirmer has a theory: "I spoke to him three weeks before he left and he told me that the Reagan administration had shut all the doors in his face and that there was no point in him hanging around the US any more. He felt his place was at the side of the Filipino people in their struggle for the return of democratic ways to their country...I think he was well aware of the dangers that lay in wait for him and I think that he went straight to these dangers because he felt that the sacrifice of his life would give impetus to the struggle for freedom and democracy in the Philippines. That is certainly a very brave and courageous act. I was told by a mutual friend that he made up his mind to return to the Philippines after being inspired by the movie *Gandhi*."

Dr. Schirmer sees the question of succession as key to understanding the possible motives of a Marcos-directed assassination. "I am presuming

all along that the Marcos government had something to do with the killing. That is the common perception in the Philippines. Everybody in the Philippines thinks they had a hand in it and so do I...It was clearly to the advantage of the Marcos crowd...The question of succession is one of growing concern in the Philippines. Marcos' health is not good. He is going to have to retire at some time or another. Mr Aquino was the greatest threat to the reinstatement of the Marcos crowd...He had the greatest support of any of the opposition leaders and in fair and square elections most observers believe that he could have defeated and candidate that the Marcos government would have put in place. It is interesting as well to remember that Marcos declared martial law in 1972 because the constitution forbade him to run for another term in office. So again it was the question of succession. And again Mr Aquino was on the scene. And everyone agreed that if the elections had been held in 1973, Mr Aquino would have been elected President of the Philippines.

"Instead he got eight years in prison, Marcos declared martial law, and there are no elections. But now there is pressure coming for elections, and the whole question of trying to keep the Marcos crowd in power--either through Mrs. Marcos, one of the generals, or some technocrat--is very much on the minds of those in power. So the question of the elimination of Mr. Aquino as a potential rival was again on the agenda. And this time martial law and dictatorship were already in force. This time he was eliminated physically."

Dr. Schirmer holds the Reagan administration indirectly responsible for the assassination of Ninoy Aquino. He notes the 1981 trip of George Bush to the Philippines in which he congratulated the Marcos regime for their adherence to "democratic principles." "Those statements by the Reagan administration supporting the government gave a green light to Marcos to do his worst. He immediately set in motion a program of recession, increased the suppression of and arrests of the labor movement leaders, cracked down on the church, suppressed the only free newspaper in the Philippines, and allowed a tripling of the number of disappearances. This is not to be divorced from the green light given to the Marcos administration by the Reagan administration. The culmination of all this policy of repression in the assassination of Senator Aquino. So we must say that the government of Ronald Reagan

is indirectly responsible for the murder. This I would maintain and this I would charge."

Dr. Schirmer views Aquino's murder as a barometer of Marcos' desperation: "This assassination strikes a new note of terror for the Philippine people as far as the Marcos regime is concerned. This is a sign of the desperation of the regime. Mr. Marcos, up to this very assassination, has been rather careful in the sense that most people who have been eliminated physically have for the most part been ordinary people. These people have been roughed up by the military and hundreds have disappeared or been murdered every year. These have been cobblers, farmers, housewives, nuns, priests, and so on. This is the first time that a member of the political elite has been eliminated. So this introduces a new note of terror into the Filipino political picture, and I think Marcos is well aware of this."

"I think that Mr. Marcos has now overstepped himself. He has generally been rather shrewd and kept his brutality more or less undercover. But now the brutality of the regime is out in the open, and the only explanation I can give is that the desperation of the regime has caused it to cast aside its ordinary discretion in cruelty and brutality and become quite blatant. And this is going to cost Mr Marcos very very dearly."

"I know that this is going to upset the public opinion of Americans and cause a stir in Congress. And it's going to increase the momentum for the democratization of US policy towards the Philippines...Fundamentally, that means the cutting off of all economic aid to the dictatorship and withdrawing US bases. This is not going to come overnight but it is going to come in time. The assassination of Senator Aquino has given a tremendous stimulus to these two policies."

Dr. Schirmer urges the American people to take steps to reassert the honor of our country in the eyes of the world by strengthening our historic ties with the Filipino people. Strong public pressure should be brought to bear on President Reagan to cancel his upcoming trip to the Philippines. Secondly, pressure should be brought on Congress to reject Reagan's request for \$900 million for the Marcos dictatorship over the next five years. And finally, pressure should be put on the executive and legislative branches of government to support the withdrawal of US military bases in the Philippines.

--Stephen Moss

## South Korea, The Philippines and Nuclear War

In the fall of 1972 Ferdinand Marcos established a military dictatorship in the Philippines. That same year Park Chung Hee established the Yushin Constitution giving him almost unlimited power in South Korea. In the years since US military and economic aid has kept the Marcos dictatorship in power and has provided crucial backing for the repressive rule of Park and his successor, Chun Doo Hwan. US support has come despite growing unpopularity of the dictators in

both countries.

Now things are even worse in the Philippines. Mr. Marcos has arrested labor leaders, representatives of the church, and newspaper editors. He has accelerated the militarization of the Philippines, driving thousands from their homes in the countryside into "strategic hamlets" on the style of the US effort in Vietnam.

On June 1, 1983, Mr. Marcos signed an agreement with Washington, the terms of which imply an