

## An Inside View of the Bases Talks

*Wilfrido V Villacorta*

*A Matter of Honor: The Story of the 1990-91 RP-US Bases Talks.* BY ALFREDO BENGZON. Pasig City: Anvil Publishing Inc, 1997.

THE American bases have gone, but relations with the United States remain a continuing concern for the Philippines. Almost one hundred years of interaction which generated mixed experiences and emotions is difficult to erase. After all, America is still a superpower that wields a strong influence in the global economy and sets the trend in global culture and communications. Its leadership of international financial institutions and economic associations maintains the interdependence of the economic and security interests of most countries in the Asia Pacific region.

After the May 1998 elections, the Philippines will have to face another major issue in its bilateral relations with the United States. The Visiting Forces

Agreement, which was recently signed by the two governments, has yet to be ratified by the Philippine Senate. In the ensuing public debates, the book by Alfredo Bengzon will be a valuable reference material. Although the Visiting Forces Agreement is not meant to restore the US military bases, popular reaction to it must be seen in the context of the Philippine experience with those bases. Lessons can also be learned from the dynamics of the bases negotiations of 1990-91.

For this purpose, Alfredo Bengzon's *A Matter of Honor: The Story of the 1990-91 RP-US Bases Talks* makes a useful companion reader to *The Senate That Said No* by former Senate President Jovito Salonga (UP Press, 1995). Chapter Nine of Salonga's book provides the story of the Senate's rejection of the proposed treaty that sought to extend the lease of the US bases. The Bengzon book is the story of how the executive branch of government handled the bases negotiations not only with the US panel but also

with the Philippine Senate.

#### **INSIDE STRUGGLE**

Bengzon, who was President Corazon Aquino's health secretary, reluctantly accepted in 1989 the added responsibility of being the chief negotiator of the Philippine bases negotiating panel. He and his fellow negotiators were preparing for the talks when the nation was rocked by the coup of December 1989. The Aquino government accepted the offer of the United States Air Force to send F-4s on 'persuasion flights' to ground rebel pilots. While some regarded the Americans' intervention as proof that the Philippines needed their bases, the incident convinced Bengzon even more that it was time to correct the country's vulnerability to foreign incursions. He wrote that 'this was not something a self-respecting nation could accept; no foreign government, whether American or otherwise, should ever have the power of life or death over the Filipino people'.

After many disappointments, Bengzon decided to resign from the negotiating panel in June 1991. He could no longer bear the accusations in the media that the Philippine panel had secretly agreed to a disguised extension of the bases. Bengzon would have felt vindicated when the Senate voted against the proposed bases treaty on 16 September 1991. But the day after that historic decision, Malacañang announced that it had sent a *note verbale* to the US ambassador, withdrawing the notice of termination of the bases which it gave to the United States in 1990. A plan to overturn the Senate decision through a

referendum was put in motion.

Bengzon's last chapter, 'Day of Reckoning', gives us a view of the struggle that took place inside Malacañang during those critical days of September 1991. Bengzon found allies in the few remaining nationalists in the Cabinet: Fulgencio Factoran Jr. Peter Garrucho and Rafael Alunan. Surprising was the fact that businessmen like Jaime Zobel, Ramon del Rosario Jr, Ricardo Romulo, Donald Dee and Raul Concepcion also voiced their resistance to the idea of a referendum, stressing that it would create a destabilizing constitutional crisis. President Aquino eventually realized that she was ill-advised in pushing for a referendum and announced that the executive branch was going to make arrangements with the United States for an 'orderly and expeditious withdrawal'.

#### **RATIONAL APPROACH**

It is interesting that a medical doctor was one of those instrumental in upholding the national integrity in the negotiations and the one who later wrote the most colorful account of such negotiations. Bengzon reflected the practical rationality of a physician in his approach to the bases. In his own words, 'If it is going to be painful, well, then, let's get on with it'. He claims that it is the price of honor. 'There is pain in surgery... anything important is purchased at the price of pain'. As a neurologist, he felt 'that those Filipinos who were arguing for the retention of the bases from the right-wing perspective were suffering from the Stockholm Syndrome. This was a

psychological phenomenon that had first been identified in the 1970s, wherein people who have been taken hostage begin to lose their bearings and start sympathizing with the hostage takers'.

Less than seven years have passed since the Senate made its fateful decision. The wounds have healed. The officials of the Pentagon, the US National Security Council, the Defense Committee of the House of Representatives, and the State Department whom I met in 1993 spoke of 'a more relaxed and healthier bilateral relationship'. The former base sites are

now the showcases of economic progress. Economic, diplomatic, and cultural cooperation between the two countries has significantly improved.

With the benefit of hindsight, we know now that mistakes were committed by both sides in handling the bases negotiations. We hope that the two governments have derived lessons from these mistakes and will not repeat the same mistakes in the efforts to secure the Senate's ratification of the Visiting Forces Agreement.