



# The Rhetoric of Accountability in Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's State of the Nation Addresses (2001-2005)

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## **Abstract**

*A constitutionally mandated speech, the State of the Nation address is regarded as one of the most important public addresses every year. Delivered by no less than the President of the Republic, the SONA presents the head of state's analysis of the national situation, serves as a means through which the government demonstrates its accountability to the people, and privileges the executive to recommend to Congress what the former perceives as fitting response to national exigencies. The fact that the SONA provides accounting for presidential actions and decisions can be interpreted, though, as a face-saving or image-restoring act. The SONA can be used as an instrument to restore the image of a perennially challenged presidency. This study examines the State of the Nation addresses of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo from 2001 to 2005. Using tools and methods of rhetorical criticism, it analyzes how these speeches have been used to account for the major decisions and actions made by the Arroyo administration during its first four years in power. Seen as interrelated discourses, the speeches reflect the Arroyo administration's rhetorical construction of reality: a curious casting and recasting of the presidential persona and the reconstitution of the Filipino people as receiving ends of democratic processes, and a persistent effort to glorify the*

*incumbent administration. This paper argues that the SONA can actually be regarded as an agency that privileges political and personal interests.*

*Keywords: state of the nation address, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, rhetorical analysis, accountability, image restoration.*

## **Introduction**

The study of speeches of our political leaders brings into fore what our national leadership “privileges and presumably admires.” Through this scholarship, speeches become “a means of illustrating and testing, of verifying or revising generalizations offered by other workers in social and intellectual history.”

Not all speeches are equal though, contends Roderick Hart, author of the 1987 book, *The Sound of Leadership: Presidential Communication in the Modern Age*. He argues that the speech of a president is more powerful than most speeches. He says,

The power derives in part from the office of the presidency, but it also derives from the attitudes presidents have toward the speech act itself. Most presidents, certainly most modern presidents, use speeches aggressively. The position they hold and the information at their command give them the tremendous advantages of saying a thing first and saying it best... Modern presidents play politics, a game about the distribution of power. Speech is how they play. (Hart 1987:800)

Hart is obviously referring to the speeches of American presidency but he may as well be referring to those delivered by Philippine presidents. Because of their salience in the country’s political life and the immense influence they make on the Filipino public, presidential speeches make interesting artifacts for scholarship. The State of the Nation address, being “the podium” of the country’s chief executive, is easily one of the most important speeches that warrant analysis and careful study. By studying the configurations of language in the State of the Nation address, one helps illuminate and explain the ideas that have been affirmed or subverted by the president.

In the landmark essay "Public Address: A Study in Social and Intellectual History" (1947), Ernest Wrage mentions that the "study of ideas provide an index to the history of man's values and goals, his hopes and fears, his aspirations and negations, to what he considers expedient and inapplicable." "Ideas," he explains, "refers widely to the formulations of thought as product and expression of social incentives, which give rise and importance to one idea, then to another," and their very nature and character during transmission is "dependent upon configurations of language" (in Burgchardt 2000:29, 32). It cannot be overemphasized then that the study of speeches or public address is the study of ideas in transmission within a historical context. Wrage substantiates this when he said,

A speech is an agency of its time, one whose surviving record provides a repository of themes and their elaborations from which we may gain insight into the life of an era as well as into the mind of a man. *From the study of speeches given by men, then it is possible to observe the reflections of prevailing social ideas and attitudes.* (Emphasis supplied)

Wayland Maxfield Parrish (1954) reaffirmed the relationship of rhetorical scholarship and history by stating that, "the student who is interested in history will not lack a motive for the study of public address" because "speeches have often been instrumental in shaping the course of history, in defining and strengthening a people's ideals, and in determining its culture."

Emphasizing the power of public address in human affairs, Edwin Black (1965) suggested that there is the need for rhetoricians to "consider the impact of discourse on rhetorical conventions, its capacity for disposing an audience to expect certain ways of arguing and certain kinds of justifications in later discourses that they encounter, even on different subjects," and to "account for the influence of the discourse on its author; the future commitment it makes for him, rhetorically and ideologically; the choices it closes to him, rhetorically and ideologically; the public image it portrays to which he must adjust." He asserts that a speech shapes our perceptions and "illuminates many of those aspects of our national experience with which we are most concerned."

## The SONA as a curious text

Every year, the President of the Philippines delivers the State of the Nation address (SONA), a constitutionally mandated speech that contains her analysis of national situation, her assessment of the government's performance during the previous year, and her recommendations for the succeeding year. The SONA is one of the many ways the executive department exercises accountability to the nation. Interestingly, year in, year out, the SONA elicits formulaic responses from the President's supporters and the opposition. This situation rarely helps the listeners distill what the President articulates and expresses in her report to the nation. It diverts people's attention to whether the President has fittingly represented the national situation and the government through her discourse and whether the agenda she proposes fit the exigencies of the times.

The practice of delivering a SONA is inscribed in section 20 of Article 7 of the 1987 Constitution, which states, "The President shall address the Congress at the opening of the regular session. He may also appear before it at any other time." This provision is quite similar to that of the United States (US) Constitution, which states that the president "shall from time to time give to the Congress Information of the State of the Union, and recommend to their consideration such Measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient." A notable difference is the explicitness of the Philippine provision on how the President should give his report on the state of the nation to Congress. That method is public address. America's first president, George Washington, initiated the practice of presenting the constitutionally mandated report on the state of the union in person. Thomas Jefferson, US's third president broke the Washington tradition by sending his report in written form. The Jeffersonian act would continue until Woodrow Wilson assumed the presidency in 1913 (Metcalf, 2004:8). Apparently, the Washington tradition was the inspiration of the writers of our Constitution.

Rigoberto Tiglao, former journalist and Mrs. Arroyo's presidential management chief of staff explains that the "SONA is the podium for the Chief Executive – as the leader of the nation – to explain where she wants to bring the country towards and to provide Filipinos her analysis of the basic strengths and weaknesses of the

nation. It is the leader's role to point to the nation's strengths and gains so as to inspire them to unite and move forward." It is not difficult to identify the major features of a SONA if one examines those delivered by Philippine presidents. A SONA presents a string of accomplishments of the incumbent, an analysis of the national situation including problems and challenges faced during the previous year, agenda or direction for the succeeding year, appeals for support and unity, and recommendations to Congress and to the Filipino people at large. The SONA also provides accounting for presidential actions and decisions, which may be contested by some sectors of society. Accountability may be very well reflected in the presentation of accomplishments and in the assessment of the national situation. But the act of accounting for presidential actions and decisions may as well be seen in an entirely different light.

To account for an action or decision can be interpreted as a face-saving or reputation-restoring act especially if the general audience or certain sectors of society question that action or decision. This act is definitely present in presidential speeches as they are seen as "commodities" that manage the image of the president (Hart 1987): they can be used to justify unpopular actions and decisions, bolster what is considered positive in the image of the president, vilify her enemies and political opponents by portraying them as characters on the wrong side of the political fence, or convince the fence-sitters and ambivalent members of the public to side with the government. Like most presidential speeches, the SONA can be seen as an opportunity to do such image-management schemes. It can be used to restore the tarnished image or reputation of a perennially challenged presidency.

In his book *Accounts, Excuses and Apologies: A Theory of Image Restoration Strategies* (1995), William Benoit presents a typology of image restoration strategies employed by speakers or rhetors when they defend themselves. Inspired by the earlier approaches from rhetoric, sociology and linguistics, Benoit came up with a comprehensive theory of image repair discourse applicable to cases involving controversies that require verbal defense. This theory was employed in a rhetorical analysis of former US President Bill Clinton's apologia having to do with his inappropriate relationship with Monica Lewinsky (Benoit 1998). Benoit concluded that Clinton's discourse was "fairly effective (with some weakness) given the nature

of his probable (intended) audience,” which included “non-hard core conservative Americans.” He noted that Clinton employed differentiation, attacked his accuser Kenneth Starr, and invoked transcendence when he dealt with the issue on misleading the people about his extramarital affair.

The theory of image-restoration strategies proposed by Benoit is based on the following assumptions: (1) that communication is a goal-directed activity and (2) that the maintenance of favorable reputation is a key goal of communication. The first of the five broad image restoration strategies is *denial*. When using denial, the rhetor can invoke his innocence, refuse to acknowledge that the act occurred or declare innocence while shifting the blame on others. Another strategy is *evasion of responsibility* where the rhetor has to tacitly admit the act but attribute it to a provocation, ignorance, accident or good intention. The third strategy is *reduction of offensiveness*. This may be done through any of the following: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser and giving compensation. Bolstering strengthens the audience’s favorable attitude towards the rhetor by dwelling on his positive attributes or the positive actions he has done. Minimization convinces the audience that the negative act may not be as bad as it appears to be. Both differentiation and transcendence are transformative rhetorical strategies. Differentiation distinguishes the act from other similar actions and makes it appear less offensive than those actions. Transcendence puts the act in a context that appeals to higher values. Attacking the accuser is meant to impugn the credibility of the one complaining or the victim of the act to reduce damage to the rhetor’s image. Compensation allows the rhetor to “renumerate the victim to help offset the negative feeling arising from the wrongful act.” It is meant as a “counterbalance” to the injury inflicted by the rhetor. *Corrective action* and *mortification* are the last two major types of image-restoration strategies. Mortification is essentially asking for forgiveness while corrective action involves rectification of the past damage and may include suggestions to prevent the recurrence of the undesirable act (Benoit 1995: 74-82). These strategies are responsible for the purification or reaffirmation of the image in question. Needless to say, concerned rhetors should be able to effectively use arguments and employ

an appropriate language style if they are to come up with effective strategies for an *apologia*.

This paper provides a rhetorical perspective on the State of the Nation addresses delivered by Gloria Macapagal Arroyo from 2001 to 2005 by examining how these speeches have been used to account for certain decisions and actions committed by the Arroyo administration during its first four years in power. Each SONA is examined with the goal of addressing the following questions: *How did the speeches represent the people to whom the President is accountable? How did the image or persona projected by the President in her speeches shape her act of accountability? What specifically did the President account for in her speeches and how did she account for them?* Before the analyses of the speeches, a brief historical sketch from 2001 to 2005 is presented to establish the salient national events that had transpired during that period of the Arroyo presidency. Finally, this paper presents possible implications of the rhetorical analyses to public policy.

### **Historical Milieu (2001-2005)**

Gloria Macapagal Arroyo was catapulted to power after the ouster of President Joseph Ejercito Estrada through a peaceful people's uprising now known as the EDSA II Revolution. She was sworn in to office as the country's 14<sup>th</sup> president on January 20, 2001, the day when the Supreme Court declared the presidency vacant. Her early months as president were hounded by questions on the legitimacy of her assumption to power. On May 1, 2001, several days after Philippine prosecutors arrested former President Estrada for charges of plunder, the Arroyo administration faced one of its toughest challenges. As they marched to Malacañang, thousands of supporters of ousted President Estrada demanded his release and reinstatement. What was regarded as a violent protest of Estrada supporters was quelled when Mrs. Arroyo declared a state of rebellion that led to the arrest of a number of protesters and leaders of the opposition. The state of rebellion was lifted a few days later. The results of the midterm elections conducted in the same month proved favorable to the Arroyo administration with the victory of administration

candidates. In her first State of the Nation address, she called for an end to political bickering and presented her agenda to win the war against poverty.

Before the end of 2001, Mrs. Arroyo was one of the first heads of state to support the US policy of “war against terror.” She would later claim to be the first national leader to establish the connection between “war against terror” and “war against poverty.” The policy of war against international terrorism would be reinforced by US-Philippine military joint exercises in Southern Philippines, near the stronghold of the Abu Sayyaf group which is said to have links to Osama Bin Laden. Her adherence to the global war against terror would be underscored in her second State of the Nation address in 2002. She incorporated such commitment in her vision to build a “strong republic” during her term. But despite exerting her best efforts to steer the country towards economic development, Mrs. Arroyo’s sincerity remained in question. Pundits observed and criticized her “weather vane” character and her apparent “over-eagerness to be elected in 2004.”

On December 30, 2002, Mrs. Arroyo announced in a speech at the Rizal Shrine in Baguio City that she would no longer run for the 2004 presidential elections: “I have decided not to run for President during the election of 2004. If I were to run, it will require a major political effort on my part. But since I’m among the principal figures in the divisive national events for the last two or three years, my political efforts can only result in never-ending divisiveness.” Her plummeting popularity in the surveys went up after her famed declaration.

On July 27, 2003, a day before she delivered her third State of the Nation address, Mrs. Arroyo faced another rebellion. This time, more than three hundred renegade junior officers and soldiers of the armed forces mutinied and seized a hotel and a shopping mall in the business district of Makati City. After twenty-two hours of negotiation, which included a televised warning from the President, the soldiers surrendered peacefully to government forces. The President later formed a commission to investigate the mutiny.

In the same year, she reverted her earlier decision not to run for the 2004 presidential elections. She explained that her supporters had clamored that she run for a second term. The highly contested elections of 2004 was viewed as an



opportunity for Mrs. Arroyo to gain a fresh mandate that would dissipate questions on the legitimacy of her first term.

On June 24, 2004, Congress declared Mrs. Arroyo as winner of the May 2004 presidential elections, beating her closest rival, popular actor Fernando Poe, Jr., with a margin of one million votes. Her victory was, however, marred by accusations that she cheated her way to the presidency. The strong accusations would temporarily take a back seat when the Iraq hostage crisis involving Filipino driver Angelo dela Cruz ensued less than a month later. Dela Cruz was taken hostage by a terrorist group in Iraq, who demanded the Philippine government to withdraw its small Filipino contingent from the Arab country in exchange for the life and freedom of the Filipino driver. The contingent was scheduled to withdraw in August of the same year. This situation was viewed as a test of Mrs. Arroyo's adherence to the global war against terror. At the same time, she was torn between having to please her countrymen at home and members of the international coalition fighting against international terrorism. In the end, she ordered the withdrawal of the Filipino troops from Iraq amid criticism from the US, Australia and members of the coalition. In her 2004 State of the Nation address, she found the opportunity to justify her decision.

Accusations that Mrs. Arroyo cheated her way to her second term persisted. But when a former deputy director of the National Bureau of Investigation claimed to have audio tapes of wiretapped telephone conversations between the president and Election Commissioner Virgilio Garcillano from May to June 2005, it signaled the start of a new string of challenges to the Arroyo presidency. The conversations purportedly proved the allegation of election cheating leveled against Mrs. Arroyo. In the taped conversations, she was supposedly asking Mr. Garcillano to ensure her victory against her closest rival by one million votes. The scandal would so captivate the public mind that on July 27, Mrs. Arroyo appeared on television to apologize for a "lapse in judgment" in deciding to make phone calls with an election commissioner. Without naming the commissioner, she also denied that she influenced the results of the elections. Few days later, ten members of her cabinet resigned from their posts and called for her resignation as well. They claimed that Mrs. Arroyo had lost the credibility to govern, the legitimacy of her election having

remained under the cloud of doubt. Political allies of the president like then Senate President Franklin Drilon and former President Corazon Aquino have also asked for her “supreme self sacrifice.” As the calls for her resignation intensified, she immediately responded through a speech that blamed the political system of the country for the instability experienced by her government. A few weeks later, she delivered her fifth State of the Nation address carrying the same premise and declaring that, “it is time to start the great debate on Charter change.”

### **SONA 2001: Presidential Plain Talk and Paper Boats**

The first SONA of Gloria Arroyo has so far been her lengthiest State of the Nation address since she assumed power. Known for its detailed presentation of the post-Estrada government’s “anti-poverty ideology,” it outlines the specific tasks that the Arroyo administration promised to undertake. At best, it provides a roadmap to where the Arroyo presidency sees the Philippines should be heading and articulates, “in plain talk and common sense,” Mrs. Arroyo’s vision for the country. The tasks are detailed under each of the four components that the President suggests are key “to win war against poverty”: “economic philosophy of free enterprise appropriate to the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” “a modernized agricultural sector founded on social equity,” “a social bias toward the disadvantaged” and improved “moral standards of government and society.”

The speech was optimistic and characterized by appeals for “unity for the country’s recovery” and calls to “set aside bickering and politicking,” an act which Arroyo herself described as “something unconventional.” Throughout the speech, the President tried to establish identification with the masses by citing her concern for their condition and making them the objects of her plans for the future. That she is able to articulate the needs of the people, especially the underprivileged, in her SONA is manifested symbolically through the story of three boys named Jomar, Jason and Erwin, who wrote their requests for jobs, educational support and housing on paper boats that they set sail through the Pasig river and that eventually reached the attention of Malacañang. The three boys from Payatas in Quezon City were later presented to the audience and served as “human props” – oratorical ornaments

– in the President's attempt to win the hearts of the poor. Before her audience at the gallery, the President made a promise to the three boys that their dreams for themselves and their families – dreams that represented Arroyo's perceived needs of the Filipino people at large – would be fulfilled under her leadership.

Considering the divisiveness brought by events still salient to the public mind (which include the ousting of former President Estrada, his eventual arrest for charges of plunder, howling protests from the masses that identify with the former president and the May 2001 elections), Mrs. Arroyo's stance in her speech was conciliatory. She was careful not to offend the forces of EDSA II which brought her to power and those of EDSA III – also touted as the “May 1 siege” – the massive protest led by supporters of former President Estrada and one of the earliest challenges to her legitimacy as president. In presenting a brief history of the nation that served as basis for her vision for the future, she included both events – one that restored “morality as the first institution of society and as the animating principle of justice and the rule of law,” and the other where the poor people “delivered the message that, 100 years after they revolted to establish this nation, they had yet to partake in the national dream.” This move was perhaps meant to assuage the ill feelings generated by the government's response to the May 1 protest. She offered palliative words: “*Dinig na dinig ko ang pahayag nila, at napakumbaba ako. Hindi ba't nasa balikat ko ang tungkuling mamuno sa pakikibaka laban sa salot ng kahirapan? Ako na siyang anak ng tinawag na 'poor boy from Lubao'? I take this duty upon my shoulders. I do so without fear or foreboding of failure.*”

Careful not to vilify members of the opposition, she attributed the “greatest obstacle we face as a nation” to the “enemy within” – “ourselves” – and assured her audience that the solid mandate to carry on with the business of governance and reform was a “vote” for the “administration and opposition” to work together to fight poverty. On the other hand, she projected herself as a no-nonsense leader who at the same time epitomized the “new culture of governance” – “the culture of plain talk and common sense.” This she demonstrated through her detailed enumeration of what she deemed as necessary and expedient to move the nation forward. For instance, in explicating the economic philosophy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century,

she articulated the need to “attract investments,” “focus on long term structural issues,” “deliver tangible results in fighting graft,” “finance full computerization of elections,” “control budget deficit by collecting taxes vigorously,” “enact law giving the OFW right to vote,” “increase the number of textbooks as well as the quality of instruction” and many more specific targets realizable during her term of office. Projecting herself as a micro-manager, she promised the future beneficiaries of modernized agriculture that she would hold office at the Department of Agriculture “until I can get a clear and demonstrable picture of our agricultural accomplishments for our first 100 days.” And while she attempted to endear herself with the masses by coming up with a list of policy recommendations that establishes a social bias towards the disadvantaged, she talked tough on strengthening justice and enforcing law and order. She affirmed her commitment to the principle that “no one is above the law” and that “justice prevails and the rule of law works in our daily lives.” She promised she would “stamp out crimes,” “put the bulk of kidnap-for-ransom syndicates behind bars,” “uphold law and order” through a “holistic response,” fight the enemy in Basilan and ensure peace and development under a framework that does “not compromise constitutionality, national sovereignty and territorial integrity.” At best, she sounded serious in her resolve to realize her vision for the country.

Notably, in her first SONA, Mrs. Arroyo accounted for her apparent conciliatory gesture toward the ousted President, who at that time, was just recently charged with plunder at the Sandiganbayan. In her attempt to transform her audience’s perception, she employed the strategy of differentiation:

If there were times that I showed concern for the personal circumstances of the former president, it is not a sign of diminished determination to see justice done. Rather, it is out of sensitivity to the feelings of the segments of our *masa* who have continued to identify with his personal circumstances.

She was, however, quick to point out her resolve: “But as I sometimes extend a hand covered by a velvet glove, inside it is an iron hand where justice and the rule of law are concerned.”

In a way, the persona brought about by her conciliatory rhetorical discourse seemed to gloss over questions on the legitimacy of her presidency. On the other hand, her style of “plain talk and common sense” showed signs of a seemingly latent toughness in her that would emerge as her administration faced more challenges, accusations and reproaches.

### **SONA 2002 and 2003: The Rhetorical Construction of a Strong Republic**

The President's latent toughness surfaced in her second and third State of the Nation addresses. Her second SONA introduced the concept of a “strong republic,” a theme that would resonate in her succeeding public addresses.

The President takes on a justificatory rhetorical posture throughout the speech. A justificatory posture, posit Ware and Linkugel (1973: 434), involves the use of bolstering and transcendence in discourse. The President, in accounting for her actions and “tough” decisions, valorized her presidency by presenting bullish accomplishments in resolving what she considered as the crises of the previous year: meeting government targets set during her first SONA, defeating threats to national security and ensuring the macro-economic stability of the country. She used the theme of “strong republic” as a frame through which the audience could view her actions and decisions.

Three key terms emerge in the second State of the Nation address of Gloria Arroyo: president, strong republic and war. The term “president” emerges with resonance because it refers to Mrs. Arroyo herself, the direct recipient of image-building strategies throughout the speech. In the speech, Mrs. Arroyo presented herself as an heir to the seat of illustrious men and woman who served as “the highest public servants.” She proudly alluded to her political lineage by mentioning her father, Diosdado Macapagal, and his words apparently to sanction the very message that she wanted to convey to her audience. She took the opportunity to valorize her father when she said that his contribution was to bring social justice to the country by changing “how a feudal society would come to view land reform.” The strategy of bolstering was most apparent when she harped on her accomplishments since she delivered her first SONA. She was bullish in presenting

her victories: “This is just the tip of our accomplishments, all in just the first year of a ten-year fight I projected against poverty. I am submitting the entire iceberg to Congress in a comprehensive performance report.” She assured her audience that things are “under control” and that “political will” would be exercised when dealing with illegal gambling, kidnapping, drug dealing and smuggling. Moreover, she projected herself as a tough leader that has to make “tough decisions” because they are “right decisions.” One of these tough decisions, which would be contested in the realm of public opinion, is her unwavering support towards the US-led war against terror. Notwithstanding intense opposition from militant groups and some opposition congressmen, she proudly proclaimed that she was first head of state to establish connection between war against terrorism and war against poverty.

By capitalizing on her tough image, she is able to put forward what she considers her fitting contribution – her vision – to the creation of an “enduring structure” or a national “edifice” – the strong republic. She tells her audience, “My countrymen, the fine stone I should like to add to the edifice of our nation, right above the stone of social justice that my father left behind, is a strong republic.”

To Mrs. Arroyo, a republic is “a shield that needs a strong arm to hold it up” and “a roof and walls, that need to be constructed.” To realize these ideals is to offer the “finest stone within (her) ability to shape,” that is, the stone of a strong republic. She characterized the strong republic as having “independence from class and sectoral interests” and having “a capacity, represented through strong institutions and a strong bureaucracy, to execute good policy and deliver essential services.” She shored up its image by stating that it is the “bedrock of victory” from poverty, “something that takes care of the people and of their future” and that its foundation is made up of “citizens with rewarding jobs paying decent wages.” Beyond these seemingly reassuring words, her strong republic can be reduced to self-contained slogans that she mentioned towards the end of her speech – “security to social justice” and “prosperity to the promise of social equality.” The terms “security” and “prosperity” sum up her avowed contribution to nation-building and her augmentation to what she claims as her father’s legacy. The terms are important in that they bring to mind what the Arroyo presidency prioritizes.

That the Arroyo presidency gives importance to security to ensure that the country becomes "a viable proposition to the world economy" was most evident in her constant use of the term "war" throughout the speech. She deliberately stated that it is only by waging war against terror and criminality that a strong republic can be made possible. This declaration is consistent with her idea of how national crises can be resolved, that is, "the preservation and defense of the republic against forces that seek to destroy its unity and tear the fabric of society, not least in the name of ideas that history has already passed by." In the speech, war is directed against those whom the president considered enemies of the republic. She did not mince words in describing how these enemies should be treated: "break the back of terrorism and criminality," "spare nothing in hunting down kidnappers," "smash the other 21 syndicates," "eliminate them within a year," "fix and finish off our targets." She considered her enemies "direct threat to the national security," and warned that "they will feel the full brunt of the arsenal of democracy." To her, criminals included those "of the common kind" and "the kind that kill in the name of political advocacies." It was clear then that early on, Mrs. Arroyo was bent on treating the insurgency as a major national problem that needs to be eliminated and not to be addressed through the negotiating table.

Since that declaration, Mrs. Arroyo has regarded the war against terrorists (including insurgents), kidnappers and drug lords in the country as part of her resolve as a major player in the "global anti-terrorist coalition." And having committed herself to the coalition, she affirmed the country's "strategic relationship with the United States through continuing training exercises to sharpen our soldiers' capabilities to move and to communicate, to fix and finish off our targets." Interesting is how she employed transcendent strategies to win her audience's support for her tough stance. She said in her speech:

At stake in this war is the very life of society, the very possibility of basic rights and liberties, which have been under attack for too long. The right to work in peace is as basic as the right to life and liberty, and when both are in danger, their preservation by all lawful means becomes not just a higher right, but an overriding duty. And that duty I will discharge.

By relating “war against terror” to fundamental issues such as right to life, liberty and peace, Mrs. Arroyo had provided rationale for the creation of an anti-terrorism bill, which she endorsed to Congress “with a great sense of urgency.”

Her call for “war against terror” and a “strong republic” persisted in her third State of the Nation address. This time, the President was apparently more aggressive as she was just fresh from surviving a failed mutiny by “misguided military officers.” She was also perceived to be fortifying her probable presidential candidacy for 2004 – an anticipated reversal of her December 2002 proclamation that she would no longer run for the highest office.

After an announcement of her triumph against the mutiny and the courses of action her administration would take to address unrest in the military, Mrs. Arroyo assured her audience, “But now we should be at peace: at peace in the countryside, safe in our homes and secure in the communities. But we remain at war. At war against terrorism. At war against corruption. At war against disease. At war against drugs. The greatest menace facing our country today.” She added to her list “war against de-stabilizers” to refer to the mutineers in the military. It would seem that at this point, she was more aggressive in pursuing her enemies, a probable result of the failed military plot against her government and a recent victory against the “drug menace.”

The President did not waste time to build up her image by projecting that she had lived up to “the virtues of a modern leader.” “In this setting,” she asserted, “the first virtue of a modern leader is a constant sense of correct perspective, the capacity to retain her original focus, and plod on regardless.” She added, “She must stick to priorities that were carefully chosen. Rather than dump them at every first issue that is recklessly raised.” Her list of priorities (which include jobs, food on the table, housing, education and national security) had remained the same in her third SONA, but it was national security that would resonate more in her public address. By identifying drugs as the greatest menace facing the country at that time and by making it appear that the fight against it is as vital as the war against terrorism, Mrs. Arroyo had made sure that the public would take seriously her role as a chief crime-buster. It was apparent that in her speech, it was this verbal hostility towards drug and terrorism that would rhetorically support her



calls for the ratification of the conventions against terrorism and the passing of an anti-terrorism law in Congress.

As in the previous speeches, the President did not lose time to present concerns that would appeal to the masses. She spoke of providing housing for the "*maralita*," land grants to thousands of poor families and affordable medicines for the poor through the national health insurance. Moreover, she professed that she does "not subscribe to trickle down economics and social policy. Those who have less in life should not have to scramble for crumbs at the feet of those with too much on the table."

She also seized the opportunity to reaffirm the country's "strategic importance in geopolitics as an active and respected voice in international affairs." She was poised to sell the country as an ideal site for "critical operations" not only due to its English educated skilled workforce, but also because of achieving the "smallest number of strikes in 21 years." She was optimistic about the eight million Filipinos who live and work abroad brushing aside problems that not a few overseas contract workers had experienced. Most importantly, this gave her the chance to inform her audience of a revitalized relationship with the US after a much touted state visit. Allaying fears of foreign domination, she said, "The benefits of our engagement with the US vastly outweigh any concerns about sovereign subordination. We should have the confidence to deal with other countries as equals – however rich, however strong, be they China, Japan, the members of the European Union or the United States."

Overall, the President considered the responses to the crises "extraordinary," "reviving our faith in the future." The speech sounded like a campaign address complete with elements that try to win the goodwill and trust of the electorate of 2004. It presented impressive accomplishments, promised a better life for Filipinos ahead, proposed solutions that pleased the visceral dimension of her listeners, and occasionally, introduced ideals that resonate with Filipino values. She capped her speech by calling for unity first in Tagalog, then in other major Philippine languages – an innovation from previous speeches.

### **SONA 2004: The President as a “Friend” and Appeals for “Tough Love”**

Gloria Macapagal Arroyo’s victory in the May 2004 elections could have easily strengthened her resolve to carry on the promises of a strong republic. But accusations that she cheated her way to the presidency had put her in an unstable position. Adding to her vexation was the hostage crises in the Middle East that involved Filipino overseas contract worker Angelo dela Cruz. Her eventual decision to pull out Filipino troops from Iraq to save the life of dela Cruz had strained relations with the US, which had been in the forefront of the global coalition against terror.

SONA 2004 was understandably used then as a speech of self-defense – a means to justify Mrs. Arroyo’s decision on the Middle East crisis and to fortify her position as the newly elected Philippine president. In this speech, she presented herself as a softened version of her persona in 2002 and 2003. This time, Mrs. Arroyo projected herself as a “friend” who appealed for “tough love” among her countrymen.

Her decision to save dela Cruz can be seen as a move to cozy up with a doubting public. Early on in her speech, she claimed that “you have a government – indeed you have a country – that cares. Your life is held more dearly than international acclaim. And you have a President who is your friend.” The “caring” and “friendly” president who also claimed to be a “protector of her people” had promised to set new directions for her six-year term: making the welfare of the people a top priority. Perhaps, because she deviated from the US-led policy of war against terror, she had no choice but to identify herself with the Filipino people whose support for her administration was not very strong. She made sure the Filipinos remembered her “new direction” by stating achievements that highlight her concern for their welfare and introducing five key reform packages that summed up her goals for her full term as president. These key reform packages include job creation through economic growth, anti-corruption through good government, social justice and basic needs, education and youth opportunity, and energy independence and savings.

To achieve these reform packages, Mrs. Arroyo appealed for “tough love”: “Tough decisions will have to be made. It’s going to be tough love from here on. It must be tougher on those who’ve made it easy than those who’ve had it tough already.” To Mrs. Arroyo, “tough love” is “sacrifice” which meant that the government and the people “must bear the pain” and “share the pain to enjoy the gain together.”

At the end of her speech, Mrs. Arroyo called for “a marriage not of convenience but of conviction, across the spectrum of parties and groups, encompassing the range of intelligent political, religious and economic views.” Her “conviction” was patent in her analysis of the national situation and her recommendations to address problems and challenges that had found expression in her speech. Confident of her victory and fresh mandate (“I emerged from the last election with more votes than any previous president” and “As a further sign of the people’s overwhelming support, they gave me a huge majority in Congress and among the local governments”), she took a more reflective approach towards national problems. As she presented each problem, she indicated its probable unfavorable consequences if left unresolved. She also offered solutions that implied sacrifices on the part of some sectors of society while occasionally pointing towards the government’s caring attitude towards the poor.

For instance, when she cited the problem of budget deficit, she expressed that the solution required “toughness on the part of the government,” “cooperation on the part of business,” “patience on the part of the people” and “active support on the part of Congress.” She asked for “profound” and “personal changes” from politicians and businessmen. She called on the former “to focus on the job at hand rather than on their prospect of re-election” while encouraging the latter to “adopt an attitude of tax acceptance not tax avoidance.” When she dealt with the problem on social justice and the challenges of addressing the people’s basic needs, she reiterated her administration’s caring attitude towards Filipinos: “*Dadalhin ko ang aking mga reporma sa taong bayan. Ako’y magpapaliwanag, ako’y makikinig.*” Her presentation progressed through a series of problem-solution pattern that led towards a suggestion for Charter change: “Once we have proved to our people that we have done what we can within the present structure of

government, we can move on changing the system to one that enhances our freedom and flexibility to do more.” She emphatically added, “I expect that next year, Congress will start considering the resolutions for Charter change.”

In her final appeal, she hinted towards the need to “rise above politics to the level of patriotism” and asked for “an end to unprincipled obstructionism.” It would seem that for Mrs. Arroyo those acts entailed tough love and she might just have been right. A year later, however, her patriotism and capacity to enact the lofty ideals she expressed in her speech would face their toughest test yet.

### **SONA 2005: Agenda Setting in the “Tale of Two Philippines”**

The most trying time of the Arroyo presidency came weeks before she delivered her fifth State of the Nation address. At this time, accusations that she cheated her way to the presidency had intensified after the infamous “Hello Garci” tapes went public. The tapes revealed what seemed to be phone conversations between the President and Election Commissioner Virgilio Garcilliano in a span of three weeks in May and June 2004. The conversations were apparently made to ensure Mrs. Arroyo’s presidential victory in the May 11 elections. On June 27, less than a month before her State of the Nation address, Mrs. Arroyo appeared on national television to apologize for her “lapse of judgment” in making “conversations” with an unnamed COMELEC official. The apology would prove ineffective as it failed to clarify the truth behind the transactions. A number of pundits would describe it as “evasive” while not a few would praise it for its legal savvy undertones. Few days after delivering her “I am sorry” speech, ten officials from Mrs. Arroyo’s cabinet resigned stating that the President had lost credibility to lead the country. This was followed by withdrawal of support by some of her closest allies such as Senate President Franklin Drilon and former President Corazon Aquino. Within twenty-four hours after arguably her most critical moment since she got her full term, she delivered another speech – this time, defiant and lashing out her critics. She spoke her “truths” about her presidency and the Philippine political system. Her most notable claim would be the need for constitutional change to address a “degenerating” political system.

The 2005 SONA then can be seen as a continuation of Mrs. Arroyo's previous discourses, especially the June 27 and July 8 speeches. While it was not expected of her to echo her apology and litany of truths before Congress, most people expected her to further clarify issues that had recently hounded her presidency. Most important among these issues was the question on her credibility to lead the country. What the audience heard on July 23, 2005 was the shortest SONA ever delivered by the Mrs. Arroyo in five years. The speech remained silent about the "Hello Garci" tapes. On the other hand, it reverberated her call for constitutional change. It reflected an interplay of the new and the old by presenting the "tale of two Philippines." The "tale of two Philippines" refers to a country "on the verge of take off" due to "recent" economic gains and a country whose progress is hindered by a "degenerating" political system.

While the speech acknowledged the "long years of cumulative national endeavor" to refer to how the national economy had become "poised for take off," it expectedly highlighted the gains during the past four years. Although less in statistics, the 2005 SONA, as in the previous ones, underscored the major feats of the Arroyo administration: "marked improvements in tax collections, infrastructure housing construction, etc.," "drug menace cut in half," "the rash of kidnappings become a thing of the past," "insurgency in the South abated," "titanic struggle to enact the three laws that comprised the biggest fiscal package in our history." Not to be left out in the speech were statements having to do with international affairs especially efforts to back up the global war against terror. That "our victories in the war on terror have been acknowledged by no less than President Bush before the US National Defense University" played a significant part of the entire speech. It was Mrs. Arroyo's way of showing that she still had the support of the world's lone superpower and that her national leadership, having been consistent with the goals of the US-led war against terror, remained indispensable.

The accomplishments painted a picture of optimism – an economy that is "resilient" and "full of potential" – to the point of apotheosizing the Arroyo presidency. But its idealization was probably meant to create a striking contrast to the "other" Philippines characterized by a degenerating political system. The

degenerating political system served as the scapegoat of the Arroyo administration for the controversies that had hounded it over the previous weeks. It may be inferred that Mrs. Arroyo's acknowledgement of a degenerating political system was her way of justifying the shortcomings of the government. She explained, "Over the years, our political system has degenerated to the extent that it is difficult for anyone to make any headway yet keep his hands clean." She added, "Perhaps we politicians have done our best; but maybe our best is not enough, given the present system. Perhaps we have strained the present political system to its final limit." And to compensate for the shortcomings of politicians operating in the present system, she offered "to change the way the government is done." She recommended a "fundamental change" in the system addressing "questions as how much more government is needed for the greater safety and economic security of our people, and how much less government is more conducive to free enterprise and economic progress." Several pundits were quick to observe that by recommending a debate on Charter change, Mrs. Arroyo exhibited astuteness in setting the national agenda and diverting attention from the controversies that had clouded her fourth year in office.

As a political tool to assuage public doubt towards the Arroyo administration, the SONA 2005 glossed over accusations that Mrs. Arroyo cheated her way to the country's highest post and that she had lost credibility to lead. She instead employed strategies to enhance her image by again presenting major accomplishments during her term and a palliative by having her audience view her actions within the frame of a degenerating political system. Mrs. Arroyo assumed an explanatory posture in order for her audience to make sense of her actions. Her words served to portray a leader who has the best intentions for her countrymen but is constrained by the realities of the present system. Having found an explanation – a scapegoat – for the recent political crises faced by her administration and the entire country, she offered compensation by recommending constitutional change. Benoit (1995:78) asserts that, "compensation functions as a bribe. If the accuser accepts the proffered inducement, and if it has sufficient value, the negative effect from the undesirable act may be outweighed, restoring reputation." The recommendation to pursue Constitutional amendments boosted up with such

sound bites as “It is time to turn to the people, bring them into government – change the way that government is done” and “Perhaps, it’s time to take power from the center to the countryside that feeds it” was apparently meant as a carrot to please not only the local government executives in the gallery but the members of the House of Representatives including those in the opposition. Thus, even if she might have not succeeded in winning the support of her enemies, she maintained her clout over local government officials and her supporters in Congress, who wielded power in the regions. Clearly, the SONA was Mrs. Arroyo’s means to reaffirm her ties with her supporters who were more than willing to applaud, advocate and assure her stay in power.

### **Insights**

The State of the Nation address, being a constitutionally mandated act, is one of the ways through which the government demonstrates its accountability to the people. Moreover, the SONA is the means through which the executive can recommend to the legislative what the former perceives as fitting response to national exigencies. This implies that having the capacity to implement laws and to determine whether the laws are working or wanting, the executive can best articulate what is necessary and beneficial for the nation. Mrs. Arroyo’s State of the Nation addresses from 2001 to 2005 manifest qualities generic to speeches of this type. As expected, the speeches set what the executive department deemed as important agenda for the years ahead. In all five SONAs, English was primarily used as the medium of communication. Filipino was used only occasionally – in certain instances concerning the economically disadvantaged or when statements reflected a political or economic principle that required emphasis. Among the five speeches, the SONA in 2003 has had the most lines in Filipino. About 40% of the address is expressed in Filipino. Not only was Tagalog used but also other major Philippine languages such as Iluko, Kapampangan and Bisaya to express Mrs. Arroyo’s final appeal for unity. Interestingly, invoking the significance of the country’s relations with the United States had been typical in the five speeches. This had intensified when Mrs. Arroyo supported the US-led war against terror.

There are several distinct features of Mrs. Arroyo's addresses, however, that deserve further examination because they indicate the reality that the rhetor offered her audience – a kind of reality that attempts to constrain the audience to certain choices when responding to the exigencies of the times (Bitzer 1968). The features address the following questions: How did the speeches represent the people to whom the President is accountable? How did the image or persona projected by the President in her speeches shape her act of accountability? What specifically did the President account for in her speeches and how did she account for them?

One salient feature is that the five addresses of Mrs. Arroyo tend to portray the people as objects of help. They represent people as victims or passive beneficiaries who are highly dependent on the government actions and decisions. This portrayal attempts to win support for the government programs even with inadequate understanding of their implications to the rest of country. This is no different from the concept of banking method that implies "the assumption of dichotomy between man and the world" (Freire 1970:62). The speeches paint a picture of the people as mere objects *in* the country not as critical subjects who are *with* it. The government's role as far as the Arroyo speeches are concerned is to deposit and regulate information in people's minds. This speaks significantly of how the Arroyo government has viewed the audience to whom it is accountable. Through the State of the Nation speeches, the Arroyo government has reconstituted the audience as mere receiving ends of democratic processes, not as engaged participants who take part in shaping these processes. In these addresses, the people are not agents that actively involve themselves in governmental affairs. Needless to say, their role in the Philippine version of democracy has been reduced to giving "overwhelming support" during the elections.

Throughout the five speeches, Mrs. Arroyo had been cast as a persona with varying degrees and shades of toughness. In her first SONA she built a sensitive image that was serious about using the iron hand of rule of law and order. Then, in her second and third State of the Nation addresses, she cast off her sensitive image and took on a tougher stance by employing the images of stone, edifice and bedrock to convey her vision of a strong republic. In the fourth SONA, delivered shortly after her second inauguration, she, however, recast herself as a President



“who is a friend.” This she did after giving in to the demands of Iraqi hostage takers that Filipino troops should be pulled out from their country in exchange for the freedom of Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) Angelo dela Cruz. In her fifth address, Mrs. Arroyo, although bullish about her administration’s accomplishments, downplayed her enactment of the presidential persona. She instead focused on the degenerating political system as a compelling reason to call for constitutional change. Having been the subject of controversies that question her legitimacy as the president-elect of 2004, she explained that her actions were constrained by the system that makes it “difficult for anyone to make any headway yet keep his hands clean.” This predisposition to switch from one image to another has caught the attention of some political observers. Since she assumed power in 2001, a number of political analysts have found her fickle-mindedness quite a turn off. Renowned journalist Shiela Coronel observed that, “the president has flip-flopped enough times that the perception is that she doesn’t believe anything, she just wants to be popular” (Coronel 2003). Her “weather vane” character, which has dismayed not a few people, has actually taken a toll on her credibility. And her speeches, if seen as a string of interrelated narratives, manifest this disappointing character. How can a character that easily changes her direction when confronted with external pressure actually exercise accountability for the actions and decisions that her administration makes?

Mrs. Arroyo’s flip-flopping character may provide explanation for the other distinctly common feature of the addresses – the inclination to downplay the weaknesses of the administration by concentrating so much on its strengths and accomplishments. While pointing to the nation’s strengths and gains is inspiring, giving cursory explanation to setbacks and misgivings on the part of the government sustains a lingering doubt that the public is being misled from the real national situation, or worse, fooled by its leader. The tendency to dodge weaknesses is a weakness in itself. The government may either be too proud to accept that it is not created to be invincible or too afraid that the people might just discover that it has more weaknesses than they could ever imagine. The tendency of the SONA to apotheosize the government’s performance confirms earlier observations that this constitutionally mandated speech is truly a tool for propaganda. As a tool for

propaganda, it serves the interest of President's supporters, of those that she desires to please and even of the President herself. The SONA apparently glorifies the administration, obscures facts reflective of the government's limitations and weaknesses and obviates thinking by creating representations that are too simplistic or viscerally appealing.

In the case of Mrs. Arroyo, the State of the Nation addresses had served as speeches of self-promotion to win the people's (or electorate's) confidence and support. They obviously served as tools to bolster the image of the President. One noticeable strategy used to build up the presidential image was by making the President utter lines that would ingratiate herself with the people. This propensity to make the President ingratiate herself with the audience explains why the State of the Nation addresses sounded more of a lip service than a sincere accounting of the performance of the government and why they appeared to be selective and confined to what the speaker's supporters wanted to hear.

Another strategy that profited the presidential image is the use of scapegoat. Scapegoating is salient in the Arroyo State of the Nation addresses. Either the situation, the constraints brought about by the system or those named as enemies of the state are identified as the cause of the problems that the nation faces. In the speeches, attribution to external factors is used as a means to evade responsibility or dismiss questions that seek the truth about the presidential actions and decisions.

### **Implications for Public Policy Concerns**

I would like to present three possible implications of this study to public policy concerns. One has to do with the use of image restoration in political speeches, especially those of the president. The second has to do with the use of the State of the Nation address as an instrument of public policy. The third touches on the role of the public – the audience members of speeches like the SONA who are “capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change.”

Benoit observes that, “issues of policy are inextricably interwoven with issues of character.” He explains that, “One reason policy statements are extremely

important is that the stances taken by politicians help define their public images” (1995: 159, 145-146). Conversely, public images influence the acceptability of these policy statements in the public mind. It may be argued that the realization of policies that the government chooses to pursue relies heavily on the reputation of its leader. Image restoration, especially of the national leadership that is constantly exposed to attacks, accusations and reproaches, will have to be taken with earnestness. After all, it favors the fortitude of a challenged leadership – something that is crucial to the delivery of its promises and recommendations for future actions. The caveat, though, is that image restoration has its limitations. It can only do so much. The main proponent of image restoration himself cautions, “We must recognize that powers of persuasion – and the theory of image restoration – are limited.” And quite convincingly, he adds, “we must have realistic expectations for what restoration can do; it cannot be expected to work miracles, and one’s actions must not contradict and undermine one’s rhetoric” (163-164).

The State of the Nation address creates rhetorical, not to mention ideological, commitments for the President. The policy statements it contains inevitably bind the President. Consequently, they become the bases for the future actions of her government. Undeniably, the SONA can also be used as a venue to constantly revitalize the image of the presidency. As gleaned from the analysis, the State of the Nation addresses from 2001 to 2005 had been used as instruments to achieve goals far beyond what they were meant for. They had been used as tools to advance certain political and even personal interests. But while the inclusion of image-restoring themes in her address to Congress remains a prerogative of the President, the primary content of the SONA should remain to be a genuine assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of her government and recommendation of measures that she deems necessary and expedient. Beyond image management concerns, the SONA should be carried out as it is expected to be carried out – that is, to serve as a guide to policy formulation. Perhaps, it may be added that if the proclivity for propaganda and image-restoration persists in the “President’s Report to the Nation,” the general listeners should not expect to hear inspiring messages from the presidential podium in one of every year’s most important rhetorical events.

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It cannot be overemphasized that the public – the “consumers” of rhetorical discourse – should be fully prepared to engage themselves in the speeches delivered by political leaders. If they are to cease from becoming mere objects of governmental concerns, the people must be informed and educated on how political messages are constructed and how they operate. As Sonja Foss, a noted teacher of rhetoric, explains, “Knowledge of the operations of rhetoric also can help make us more sophisticated audience members for messages. When we understand the various options available to rhetors in the construction of messages and how they function together to create the effects they produce, we are able to question the choices others make in the construction of acts and artifacts. We are less inclined to accept existing rhetorical practices and to respond uncritically to the messages we encounter. As a result, we become more engaged and active participants in shaping the nature of the worlds in which we live.”

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