Book Review

Gareth Porter, *The Politics of Counterinsurgency in the Philippines: Military and Political Options* (Philippine Studies Occasional Paper No. 9), Center for Philippine Studies, University of Hawaii, 1987.

Walden Bello, *Creating the Third Force: U.S.-Sponsored Low Intensity Conflict in the Philippines* (Food First Development Series), The Institute for Food and Development, San Francisco, CA, 1987.

One of the most enduring received wisdoms which the events of February 1986 engendered is the alleged discredit which befell the radical Left as a consequence of its having boycotted the snap election. True enough, the ascension into power of Mrs. Aquino simultaneously ushered in an unprecedented period of reflux and ebb for the CPP-NPA-NDF and allied mass organizations, popularly perceived in the wake of EDSA as having been swept aside, like the Marcos dictatorship, to an ignominious end. Two extremist troublemakers meeting the same fate at the hands of an enraged "moderate" citizenry: the image is reassuring to the centrist *parti pris* of the Aquino presidency. It also fits in with the Reagan administration's policy of support for "newly restored democracies" in the Third World. This neatly "dialectical" view, however, cannot account for the persistence of the armed insurgency and *a fortiori,* the existence, long after the much-vaunted "revolution", of the basic socio-economic problems on which the NPA insurgency feeds.

One of these problems which EDSA has precisely helped to exacerbate is the politicization of the Philippine military. For Mrs. Aquino's ascension to power was impossible without the U.S.-backed army's last-minute mutiny against the Marcos-Ver dictatorship, and the "new" AFP has not missed an occasion ever since to make reminders, alternately crude or subtle, about the precariousness of her claim to civilian supremacy. The administration's repeated moves to appease the military in pursuit of what it thinks is an even-handed policy have encouraged the RAM, theoretically outlawed but still existing *de facto,* in its drive to "complete" the "EDSA revolution." This works to the detriment, of course, of the non-violent myth of EDSA. In the meantime the armed insurgency has continued to benefit from the contradictions between civilian authority and the army which seem to be the legacy of the denouement of the events of February 1986.

Two works that distinguish themselves from the plethoric outflow of accounts and exegeses of the events of February 1986 are Gareth Porter's monograph and Walden Bello's slim-sized book, both of which appeared a year later. Both are careful to avoid falling into the double trap of joining in the simple-minded adulation of the AFP, the RAM and the "heroes of EDSA" that characterize most other contemporary publications; and pronouncing a (premature) post-mortem on the radical Left. This wariness serves them all the better as the configuration of the post-EDSA political situation has so far tended to highlight the worsening of the problem of the politicized Philippine military. (For a reader like this reviewer who came to read *Politics of Counterinsurgency and Creating the Third Force* only in mid-1988, there is no question that in the main their respective discussions of the troubled relations between civilian and military authorities have remained highly cogent in spite of the vicissitudes of the post-EDSA fallout.)

Porter argues that it is too late in the day to eliminate the NPA by military force. There must be a reassessment of orthodox counterinsurgency policy, which stresses the military component. He also hints that the insurgents may be amenable to a shift in tactics away from the armed struggle, and contends that an "incorporation" approach that will make the insurgents feel that they have a stake in the maintenance of Mrs. Aquino's reformist policy just might do the trick. "Making them an offer they can't refuse" is definitely an innovative way of devalorizing the armed struggle and channeling the insurgents' energies into constructive nation-building activity, and Porter's sincerity in contributing to a peaceful settlement cannot be gainsaid The problem lies in his over-optimistic assumptions about two of the major actors in the Philippine drama: the armed forces and the U.S. government.

Specifically, Porter's "incorporation" approach consists of land reform plus a policy of involving the insurgents in a number of collaborative measures: the government and the NDF could put up a common front on certain issues like Right-wing opposition parties; or the NDF could disarm Right-wing fanatics and the CHDFs. At this point the issue of outdated judgment just might be raised against Porter. His monograph was completed before the 22 January 1987 massacre of KMP peasants in the vicinity of the presidential palace; the incident served as a pretext for the NDF to call off the peace talks and to accuse the government of bad faith. This would explain Porter's optimism at least in part, but his idea of "incorporation" seems to take for granted either (1) the government armed forces' willingness to let their prerogatives be handed over to the NPA, or (2) the nihil obstat of the armed forces' American backers, advisers and suppliers. This is not to mention the dubious capability of the civilian authorities to continue extracting concessions from the military establishment after the first few months of Mrs. Aquino's assumption into office. Whether before or after the Mendiola Bridge massacre, neither the armed

forces nor the U.S. government were particularly noted for their enthusiasm for the notion of empowering the armed insurgents in their respective guerilla fronts, and rightly so. This disabused reflection alludes not only to the ideological motivations of the insurgents' leadership — of course they have their ideology to look after — but also to the deeply-rooted anti-communism, abetted by the U.S. government, of the AFP. Both factors militate against the utopian premises of the "incorporation" strategy.

But does Porter really need to be so informed? He himself acknowledges (p. 74) that Mrs. Aquino has been outmaneuvered by the U.S.-backed army, and that she has not been getting the proper support from Washington (pp. 132-143). Some questions might then pertinently be posed: is the Porter study beamed to the right (sympathetic, receptive) audience? What results can its recommendations realistically hope to achieve?

The last chapter on "U.S. Policy and Counterinsurgency" offers several valuable insights, unavailable elsewhere, into official U.S. reflexes vis-a-vis the Aquino administration's handling (or mishandling) of the insurgency. Here Porter makes the telling allegation that the Reagan administration was willing to go along with Manila's initiative to negotiate with the NDF "only on the assumption that Aquino would return within a reasonable period of time to put more emphasis on a combined counterinsurgency strategy within which the AFP would be allowed free rein to fight" (p. 141). As it turned out, the ceasefire-negotiations period drew to a predictably unfruitful conclusion on 22 January 1987. But long before that date, the momentum of RAM's trajectory had already placed it on a collision course with Mrs. Aquino's reformist ideas. To this day, the RAM factor continues to weigh significantly in the making of decisions crucial to the regime and to the nation at large. How Porter could have, in these conditions, presumed to offer advice of a nature to "soften" the insurgents *while* keeping the AFP and its American backers at bay strains the imagination. This is not to mention Mrs. Aquino's celebrated aversion to unsolicited advice. In the end, Porter's voice comes through clearer on Washington's wavelength than on Manila's; but one might very well wonder if the American policymakers are that receptive to an all-carrots, no-stick approach where its application in the country harboring the last US bases in Southeast Asia is concerned. In the process Porter might be sending wrong signals to all parties concerned, not the least of which would be the Philippine radical Left.

Written much later in 1987, *Creating the Third Force* is less prone to projecting rosy visions of a negotiated peace. The harsh realities of a protracted struggle overdetermined by the imperatives of American hegemony and security are acknowledged, but so are the objectively counter-revolutionary possibilities of a moderate "Third Force." Interestingly, on the question of the Huks' decline Bello echoes Porter's contention that the

insurgents were first defeated politically before they were incapacitated militarily: hence the importance, for the future of the Left movement, of drawing the correct lessons from the political setback for the Left that Mrs. Aquino's victory represented.

But what is the "Third Force" in the first place, and why is it important to the counter-insurgency schemes of a post-Marcos regime? Bello seems satisfied with the definition provided by the neoconservative journalist and essayist Charles Krauthammer: *viz.*, "a democratic alternative to a pro-American despot on the one hand and communist insurgencies on the other" (p. 12). This definition is tendentious and misleading; the famous "Third Force" can be just as pro-American as the despot in power, if not more so. In fact, a pro-American despot who remains indefinitely in power is in the long run more dangerous for U.S. interests than someone who is perceived as less pro-American: public opinion eventually comes to identify U.S. policy as identical to cynicism, dictator-coddling, etc., and the downfall of the U.S. in that country accompanies that of the dictator (as in Iran and in Nicaragua). Unless, of course, an EDSA-type operation succeeds, whereby pro-American contender ousts pro-American dictator thanks to combination of mutiny of pro-American army plus uprising led by pro-American upper-class opposition, thereby saving the day for the U.S. (After Ronald Reagan began, on 23 February 1986, to change his tune on the conduct of the snap election, did Mrs. Aquino have any more reason to resent the U.S. government's position?) One might also question Krauthammer's conceptualization in this manner: once installed in power, does not the so-called "Third Force" tend to become the *de facto* "First Force" which it has replaced, in the sense that it more willingly assumes the mantle of anti-communism as a reflex of State self-defense?

Bello argues that the "Third Force" strategy was first elaborated during Ramon Magsaysay's anti-Huk campaign; significantly, its prime mover, the CIA operative Edward Lansdale, had a background as an advertising man who could in his new Philippine assignment make the *impression* of socio-political reform count more than the substance of it. For instance, the Magsaysay-sponsored EDCOR scored a major propaganda coup against the hard-core insurgents by building the image of "even dedicated Huks . . . abandoning the armed struggle and enlisting in the government program" (p. 14); yet EDCOR remained essentially a paper project. Combined with the two other prongs of Lansdale's strategy: military reform and "civic action", and innovations in military tactics, the basic "Third Force" approach became a textbook case for successful counter-insurgency. (However, Bello does not deal with the U.S. strategists' failure in South Vietnam to promote and impose Gen. Duong Van Minh and other "neutralists" as a "third alternative" to the Ky-Thieu regimes and the National Front for Liberation during the 1968-1975 period; the lessons there seems to be that the Lansdale strategy is not necessarily of universal applicability.)

Three decades later the "Third Force", incarnated in Mrs. Aquino, was again triumphant in the Philippines ("at least temporarily", adds Bello). Was there a Lansdale in the wings, concocting novel PR schemes to disarm and demoralize the NPA? Bello hints at no such thing. Rather he puts the accent on the various ways through which the radical Left objectively exposed itself to the devastating effects of the Cory Aquino phenomenon, and incidentally makes several references to the "war weariness" of the population at large. However, a resurgence of the revolutionary Left's initiative is not ruled out: four factors which Bello cites are the dismal prospects of the Aquino regime's version of agrarian reform; the country's huge indebtedness to exploitative foreign financial institutions; the undisciplined and professional nature of the AFP; and the high-level quality of the insurgents as a political force. Provided it makes the right moves, of course.

Bello bolsters his argument by marshalling data on the U.S. military commitment to the AFP (armaments, materiel, etc.). But for his analysis of the "Third Force" strategy alone — the first time it has been treated in the context of Low Intensity Conflict as the latter is carried out in this country, to the best of one's recollection — Bello's work is must reading, and not just for students of Philippine politics and social movements.

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