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Send Marcos Packing

By ARTHUR SCHLESINGER JR.

There is a certain grim irony in the vacillations of the Reagan administration as it confronts the decomposing Marcos regime in the Philippines. Only five years ago during the presidential campaign, Mr. Reagan and his neoconservative intellectuals condemned President Carter for abandoning our great "friends" the shah of Iran and Anastasio Somoza and in consequence "losing" Iran and Nicaragua. The implication was that a stronger president would have pursued tougher policies and that these policies could easily have preserved those wonderful friends of the U.S.

A conservative administration in Washington, the argument ran, would never have undermined pro-American regimes by insistence on human rights, social reforms, a peaceful transition to democratic government and other such sentimental nonsense. It would have given these friends of America unconditional support and would have done whatever was necessary to rescue them. If only there had been a Republican president, the shah and Somoza would still be in power, and their countries would still be in the Western camp.

By No Means Clear

This line of argument raised questions, then and now. Assuming for the moment that it might have been in the national interest of the U.S. to preserve thieving despots in Iran and Nicaragua, it is by no means clear that it lay within U.S. power to do so. Rhetorical assistance will not do it. Mr. Carter tried that, congratulating the shah in 1977 on "the admiration and love which your people give to you" and praising Somoza as late as 1979 for his progress on human rights. Military assistance will not do it. The U.S. sold \$19.5 billion in arms to Iran from 1972 to 1979, and Somoza's National Guard never languished from lack of weapons.

We always overrate the capacity of the U.S. to shape the destiny of other countries. The balance of internal forces generally decides the future of nations. If President Carter had never opened his mouth on the subject of human rights, the shah and Somoza would have fallen all the same. It seems most doubtful that any U.S. policy short of military occupation could have saved them. And one wonders whether it serves long-term American interests for the U.S. to intervene militarily in other countries in order to protect hated regimes against the wrath of their own people.

These questions remain speculative in relation to Iran and Nicaragua. But the Reaganite assumption that there was an easy alternative to the Carter policy now comes to the test in the Philippines. For Ferdinand Marcos is in the same position today that the shah and Somoza were in during the late 1970s. This surely is the time for those brave solutions that, according to neoconservative myth, Mr. Carter so

softly rejected a few years back. Instead, one finds the Reagan administration pursuing the same policy toward the Philippines that the Carter administration pursued toward Iran and Nicaragua.

Ronald Reagan, like Jimmy Carter, began with an effort to reform a disintegrating regime by fulsome rhetorical blandishment. This is the famous policy of "constructive engagement" with repressive governments. Vice President George Bush declared that he loved President Marcos for his "adherence to democratic principles." President Reagan said in last year's presidential campaign that the choice was between Mr. Marcos and "a large communist movement to take over the Philippines." Mr. Marcos naturally interpreted such tender words not as a signal to change his ways but as a license to intensify his course of domestic plunder and repression.

But the more his men have harassed and murdered political opponents, the more money they have stolen from their country, the stronger the opposition has become. As disintegration continues, the Reagan administration, like the Carter administration before it, is changing its course. Now we are urging on Mr. Marcos the need for human rights, social reform and a peaceful transition to democratic government. Mr. Reagan today is duplicating in the Philippines the policy for which he so righteously denounced Mr. Carter in the cases of Iran and Nicaragua.

He is doing so because he has no more real choice in 1985 than Mr. Carter had in 1979. He is learning now what Mr. Carter learned then: that there is no virtue in tying the U.S. to a despotic regime doomed to collapse. The course of unconditional commitment to unpopular despots is not likely, in the absence of military intervention, to save the despots—and it is quite certain to alienate the inevitable successor regime and in the meantime to strengthen Marxist revolutionaries.

Can reform pressure salvage the situation? The best hope in the Philippines would be the orderly transfer of power to the moderate opposition. So the U.S. is calling on Mr. Marcos, as President Carter called on the shah and Somoza, to do things that, if he carries them out, will destroy the bases of his power. It would be foolish to count on Mr. Marcos to collaborate in bringing about his own downfall. His interest lies not in strengthening the moderate opposition but in destroying it. His hope lies in polarizing the nation so that he can present himself as the only alternative to communist takeover.

Mr. Reagan, like Mr. Carter before him, is impaled on a dilemma. The longer he waits in the vain expectation that Mr. Marcos will voluntarily undertake reforms and relinquish power, the more radicalized the situation will become and the less likely it is that the moderate opposition will inherit. Mr. Carter waited too long in

Iran and Nicaragua. The democratic alternative, such as it may have been, melted away, and we were left with Ayatollah Khomeini and the Sandinistas.

But what can we effectively do to help the democratic alternative in the Philippines? Secretary of State George Shultz in London the other day delivered a paean in praise of covert action. By this he meant aid for guerrilla bands in Nicaragua, Angola, Cambodia and Afghanistan. Actually the history of covert action shows that it has had its enduring triumphs when employed for political rather than for military ends—not to kill communists but to support democrats, as in Western Europe in the late 1940s.

There is not much the U.S. can do to control the destiny of the Philippines. The moderate opposition, though it has finally agreed on a ticket in the presidential election, has not shown much unity of purpose so far. But it does enjoy widespread popular support. The U.S. should distance itself even more unequivocally from the Marcos disaster and do what it discreetly can to help democratic Filipinos make a strong showing in the elections that the regime at this very moment is planning to rig against them.

Exploited Favor and Aid

I trust we will not be diverted from a realistic course by talk about how much the U.S. "owes" to Mr. Marcos. Talk about sentimentality! Mr. Marcos has never sacrificed his own interests to help the U.S., anymore than the shah and Somoza did before him. Like the shah and Somoza, Mr. Marcos has systematically exploited the favor and aid of the U.S. to amass personal power and wealth. Rep. Stephen Solarz's House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs is documenting this point in its current hearings. As The Economist crisply puts it, "The only aid (or 'rent for a base') that should be given to people like Mr. Marcos is a one-way ticket to an anti-assassin-guarded holiday resort."

It has taken the Reagan administration a long time to learn the lesson the Carter administration learned so painfully about the unprofitability of trying to prop up doomed despots. As the Reagan people begin to learn the lesson in the Philippines, one hopes that they will apply it in other parts of the world.

There is every indication that Gen. Augusto Pinochet in Chile stands today about where Mr. Marcos stood in, say, 1983. Constructive engagement will not reform Gen. Pinochet any more than it did Mr. Marcos. Effusive words will only encourage him in a course of repression. Let us move to divorce the U.S. from the brutal dictator in Chile before the situation is hopelessly radicalized and while there is still time for a democratic alternative to emerge.

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