

Military Insurgency: Reflections on Gringo's Adventure*

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In the vocabulary of Cold War politics, *insurgency* is associated with the Left while the military stands for law and order. The concept of *military insurgency* sounds like a contradiction in terms. But there are moments in the history of a country when reality makes a mockery of conventional wisdom, when events do not follow the prevailing notion of how things ought to happen. The ensuing search for extraneous causes to explain unfamiliar phenomena like military insurrections has led to wild conclusions. If not ascribed to the will of God, they are ascribed to the will of Gen. Singlaub.

One example is the "theory" that the recent coups were arranged by Joker Arroyo in collusion with the military and the CIA to divert public attention from such embarrassing incidents as the Olalia murder and the Mendiola massacre. Following this line of thought, the Gringo affair can be dismissed as a ploy to defuse people's anger at the oil price hike.

There might indeed be some causal links between the Olalia murder and "God Save the Queen", between the Mendiola massacre and the GMA 7 occupation, and between oil and Gringo. But the connections may not be as straightforward as the conspiracy theory presumes. Such events come in pairs simply because intelligent plotters choose moments of crisis to launch a coup, when the government's attention is divided and the people are unable to respond quickly and decisively. If no crisis exists, the plotters will find a way to provoke it.

A crisis makes people acquiesce to illegal seizures of power and the establishment of a *junta* as an emergency measure. It also compels the government to focus on another force, leaving its flanks unguarded. But this does not mean that a coup is just a *moro-moro*. In a *moro-moro*, as in professional wrestling, the protagonists know they are just play acting. In the latest coup, the protagonists seriously tried to overwhelm each other even as they also tried to minimize the casualties.

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The 28 August coup attempt -- codenamed "A Star Will Fall, The Sun Will Rise" -- was the sixth in two years and the fifth against the 18-month old government of President Corazon Aquino.

The Peak of Her Popularity

A magnificent opportunity presented itself when Cory, advised by the representatives of big business in her government, decided to raise the price of oil. The decision was so unpopular that it disheartened even the "yellow crowd", her own political base. Although the low level of mobilization for the *welgang bayan* on August 26 indicated reluctance to take overt action, people stayed home in silent protest. The empty streets of Manila on that day was an eloquent protest against a particular policy, but did not necessarily imply rejection of the regime itself, much less the people's readiness to replace civilian rule with a *junta* of military scalawags.

Misconstruing the significance of the *welgang bayan*, Gringo two days later brought a strike force of some 800 men to Metro Manila. Augmented by RAM-led troops in the national capital, one column attacked Malacañang at 1:25 am, perhaps to abduct President Aquino and force her to sign a deed of abdication. Gringo personally commanded the column which captured the DND building in Camp Aguinaldo. Other columns captured Villamor Air Base (headquarters of the Philippine Air Force), Broadcast City and the Channel 4/ABS-CBN complex.

The following military units reportedly joined the revolt: 14th Infantry Battalion (Nueva Ecija); 62nd Infantry Battalion (Nueva Ecija); 3rd, 7th and 10th Companies of the 1st Scout Ranger regiment, PMA Corps of Cadets; PC Regional Command 7 (Cebu); 3rd Light Armored Battalion; Philippine Army Special Operations School (Nueva Ecija); Nueva Ecija PC-INP Provincial Command; and DND military personnel, including the aides of Secretary Rafael Ileteo.

In at least six provinces (Cebu, Bohol, Pampanga, Cagayan, Quirino and Albay) the military overthrew the civilian authority. They raised the Philippine flag upside down, closed the capitol buildings, arrested local government officials, and silenced the electronic media other than those sympathetic to the rebel cause.

In analyzing a coup, the size of the strike force is not the most vital factor. Senator Raul Manglapus, chairman of the Senate Committee on Defence, estimated that less than 1,000 men were directly involved. This figure is obviously wrong because 1,033 surrendered or were captured in Metro Manila alone. Since "Bloody Friday," several hundreds -- including

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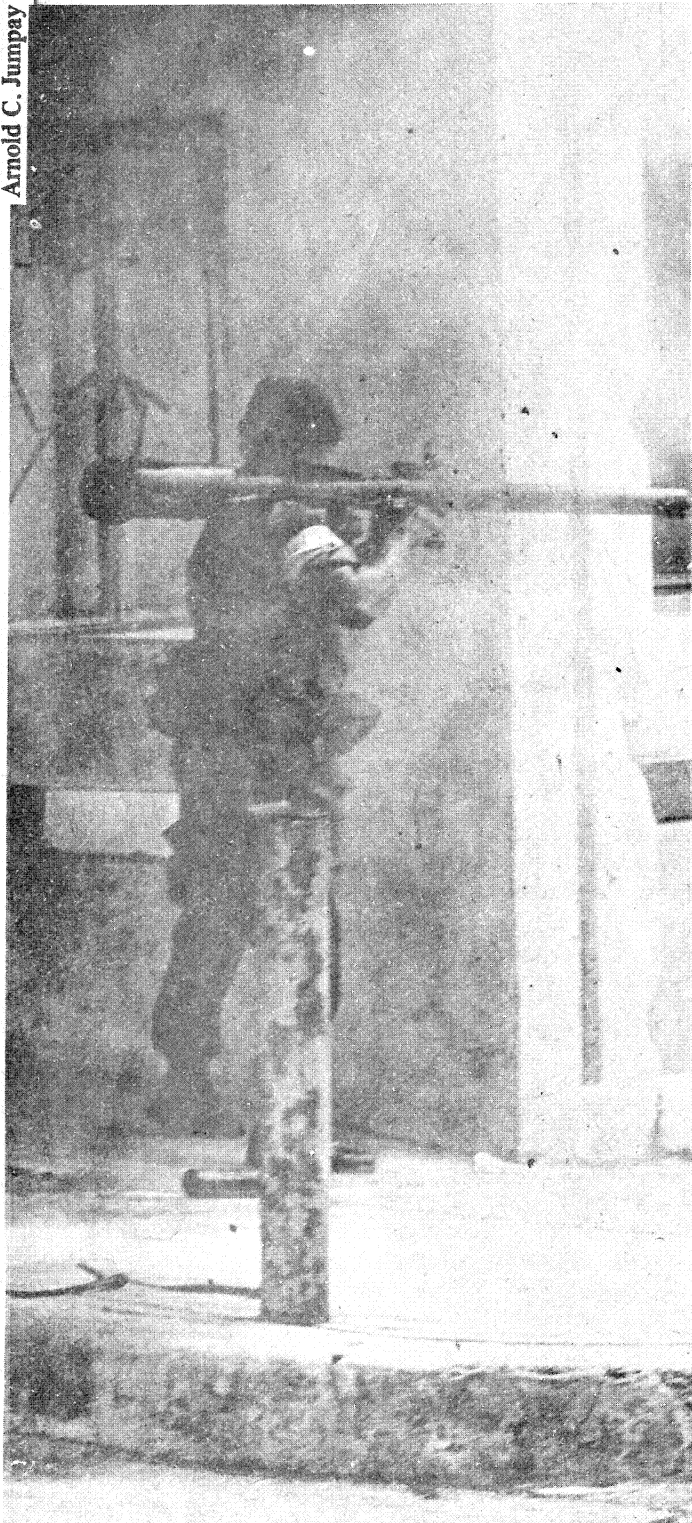
Gringo and his top co-conspirators -- have gone AWOL. In addition, an undetermined number formed part of the conspiracy but were unable to move. Perhaps, they are now pretending to cooperate with Ramos' ineffectual mopping up operations.

The number of those who took overt acts of rebellion is already a cause for great anxiety. Even more disconcerting were those who stayed neutral. The experiences of other Third World countries have shown that a coup involving only a handful of troops can overturn a government, provided the rest of the armed forces take a wait-and-see attitude. On 28 August neutrality among the troops in Metro-Manila was so widespread that Ramos could not execute the President's order to "crush the mutiny as soon as possible". Many refused to obey the chief of staff. He did not know whom to trust. Thus Gen. Ramos found himself in exactly the same position as Gen. Fabian Ver on February 22, 1986.

Ramos wisely ignored Teddyboy Locsin's insistence on an early counter-attack and the immediate recovery of rebel-controlled TV stations. That foolish suggestion would have spread thinly the already depleted government forces, thus endangering the military communications center in Camp Crame. Instead, Ramos waited until the loyal Marines could recapture Villamor Air Base and secure the Manila domestic and international airports. Then he had reliable troops airlifted from the Southern Command in far-away Zamboanga. Only when they arrived at around 3 pm. did Ramos begin the siege of rebel positions in Camp Aguinaldo.

The 15th Strike Wing and the 5th Fighter Wing of the Philippine Air Force obviously remained neutral because Ramos had to make do with two Tora-Tora propeller-driven training planes to strafe Honasan's troops. These World War II vintage aircrafts could have been retrieved from a museum! They were in such bad state of repair that one of them crashed the day after, causing its gallant pilot to lose a tooth! The Sikorsky helicopter gunships and the fighter planes that played a heroic part in the February Revolution were nowhere to be found on "Bloody Friday".

The thousands of curiosity seekers who flocked to EDSA and the millions who watched on TV the siege of Camp Aguinaldo witnessed the reluctance of government troopers to aim their rifles at the renegade soldiers. They were just following orders. They were not committed to the defense of democratic space on the principle of civilian supremacy. A lingering sense of camaraderie inhibited them from killing their brothers in uniform, until they were fired upon. Had there been a stalemate at nightfall and they had a chance to



discuss among themselves, one could not be certain where they would have stood the morning after.

By contrast, Honasan's men were more convinced of their cause. At the beginning, it is true, they exercised some restraint. They kept off the third floor of Villamor Air Base where Maj.-Gen. Sotelo was holding out. They also left alone the section of the AFP GHQ building occupied by Maj.-Gen. Ermita and Brig.-Gen. Montaña. But in Malacañang early that morning and in Camp Aguinaldo in the afternoon, when some of them were killed or wounded, they fought with the fervor of zealots. They even sprayed bullets at civilians who were chanting "Cory, Cory, Cory."

Governor Binay and Mayor Simon richly deserved the tongue-lashing by Gen. Ramos. Instead of meddling with the military operations to which they could not contribute anything positive, they should have done what they did in February: mobilizing civilian support for the Aquino government. While the battle was raging at EDSA, hundreds of thousands should have been called to mass up points, ready for another spectacular display of people's power. It was important at that critical juncture to convince the wavering troops that the people were not on Gringo's side.

Rejoicing over the triumph of Philippine democracy is premature at this stage. Col. Gringo Honasan may have lost a military battle, but he won a great political victory. All of a sudden his stature grew from a mere bodyguard of the Defense Minister to a formidable alternative to the popular but bungling President. He has emerged as the rallying symbol of the opposition, consigning to the periphery both Marcos and Enrile, his former boss.

Gringo escaped with a few hundred hard-core followers, including some of the finest officers of the armed forces. With these alone, he can already form a rebel army. As well, he can count on his vast reserves and appeal to the neutrals. Hence, despite hollow assurances that "everything is under control," the residents of Metro Manila live in constant fear that Gringo will strike again.

The civilian population in Metro Manila are nervous and extremely susceptible to psywar tactics. Rumors of an impending coup circulate fast, getting wilder as they pass from mouth to mouth. Like the communists in the underground, Gringo can avail of the democratic space to propagate his ultra-Rightist platform.

Gringo should realize by now that, having blown up his cover, he can no longer stage a coup in the proper sense of the word. He must either launch a frontal attack if he has enough men and equipment, or shift to guerrilla tactics. A reputed counter-guerrilla expert, he is uniquely qualified for the latter type of combat. Moreover, the core of his rebel army are scout rangers and special forces he had trained in unconventional warfare.

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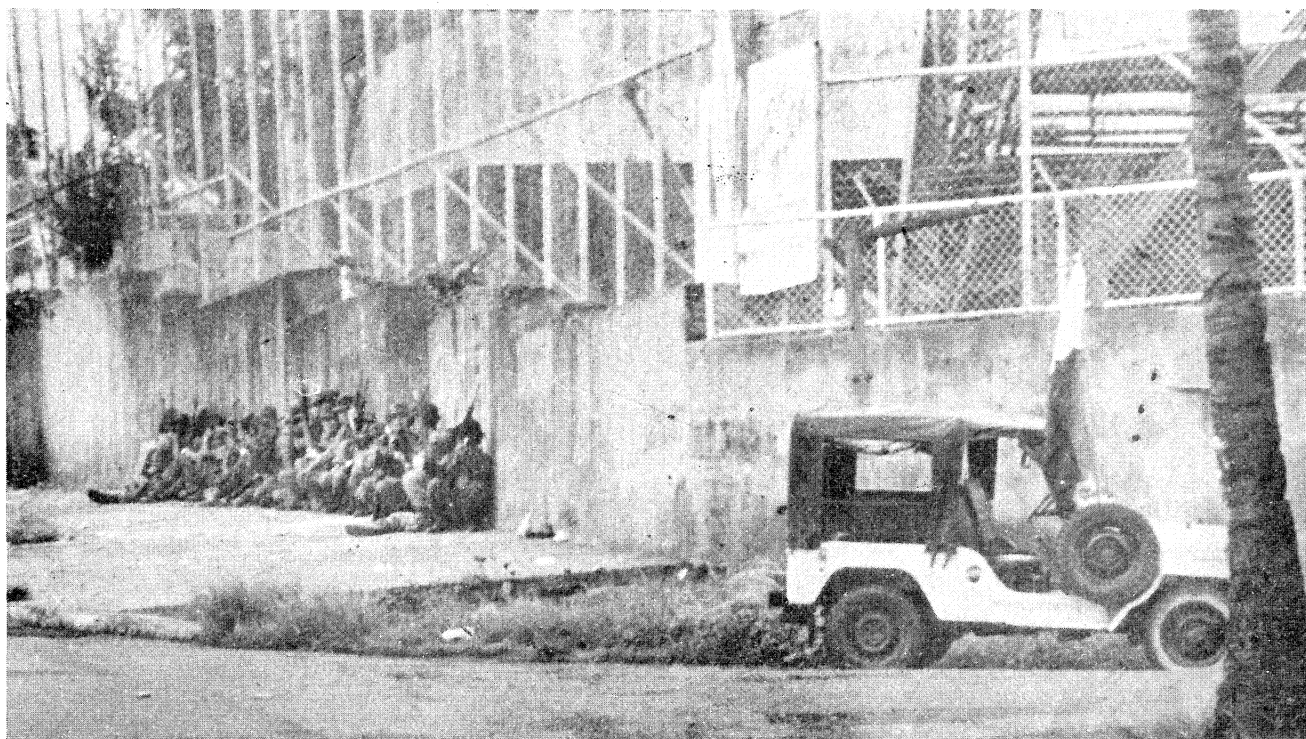


Skeptics will surely point out that coup plotters seldom make good guerrillas. Counter-guerrilla skills are not readily convertible because they presuppose state support. Guerrilla warfare requires a popular base but conspirators, obsessed with secrecy, have a mindframe that cannot appreciate political work among the masses. Their soldiers, imbued with mercenary values but trained to blindly obey orders, cannot have the capacity for selfless sacrifice and the creativity required of a guerrilla fighter.

These, of course, are impediments Gringo must overcome to wage a protracted guerrilla war. It should be noted, however, that never in the history of the Philippine armed forces had there been a military leader that elicited so much public adulation as Gringo did in the immediate post-Marcos period. Whether the charisma was his own or a reflection of Cory's remains to be tested. If he can evoke the same degree of enthusiasm in a struggle against Cory and reinforce this with a seductive socio-economic program, he may yet succeed in building a mass base for his rebel movement.

In his next offensive, whether he resorts to frontal combat or guerrilla warfare, Gringo has to rectify some tactical flaws in the August 28 operation. His biggest blunder was to delay the seizure of the AFP communications centre and neglect Philcomsat. As a consequence, he was unable to airlift rebel reinforcements from his bastions in Cagayan, Baguio, Cebu and Albay in the few hours when his men controlled Villamor Air Base. The recovery of that base by the troops of Gen. Ramos was the turning point in the one-day war.

Jun Sepe





On the whole, the August 28 operation markedly improved on previous coup attempts. Gringo showed himself to have gained a mastery of the technology of coup d'etat. Unfortunately, Cory's political advisers seem to have unlearned the technology of people's power. Instead of urging people to fill up the churches and prepare for a massive resistance, as she did after Marcos cheated in the 1986 presidential elections, she told them to stay home and leave the defense of democracy to the military.

When one radio station after another abruptly signed off in the morning of August 28 and Rey Langit announced that DZRH too may have to stop broadcasting, political observers immediately assumed the order came from Honasan. For the side which cannot count on people's power has reason to keep people in the dark. That was precisely what the perfidious Brig.-Gen. Edgardo Abenina did in Cebu. But they were flabbergasted to find out that in Metro Manila the telecommunications commissioner himself was the one who threatened to close down the radio stations. If carried out, the government would have deprived itself of a powerful weapon. It would have been difficult, if not impossible, to mobilize people who were oblivious of the unfolding menace.

Victory obtained through a series of fortuitous circumstances cannot ensure the regime's survival. Unless Cory mobi-

lizes people's power at a magnitude that can reinforce the morale of the government troops while convincing those who stayed neutral that Gringo cannot govern even if he succeeds in usurping power, the Philippines may soon have a cute adventurer for a dictator.

Soldiers who have had a taste of power will never again be comfortable in the barracks. Once politicized, they cannot be depoliticized. There is no easy solution to this dreadful problem Marcos bequeathed to the nation. The "shoot to kill" order for Gringo is counter-productive. His brothers in uniform are unlikely to carry out such an order, even if they make the motions of participating in the manhunt. Besides, a dead Gringo can be as menacing to Cory as the dead Ninoy was to Marcos. Executing the captured renegades may only provoke a backlash from the rest of the armed forces. But forgiveness, as suggested by Vice-President Salvador Laurel, will further erode discipline.

Recent events have shown that neither President Aquino nor Secretary Rafael Iletto and Gen. Ramos control the entire armed forces. Judicial probes and legislation are an exercise in futility where soldiers have lost their respect for law. The so-called value formation seminars cannot teach old rascals good manners. A revised PMA curriculum may be useful, but its salutary effects can be felt only in the distant future.

Democracy in the Philippines is facing an immediate threat. Its survival depends on the immediate creation of countervailing structures of people's power. The people must have a demonstrable capacity to intervene quickly and decisively thwart any attempt of a military clique to usurp political power. It is important to convey a loud and clear message, especially to those soldiers who betrayed a milder degree of disloyalty by taking a neutral stance in the face of Gringo's challenge, that *a junta cannot govern because the people will resist.*

Unfortunately, the President does not seem to be thinking in this direction. While continuing to talk tough ["There will be no terms. I have nothing to say to these traitors."], there is an increasing probability that her faint-hearted advisers will persuade her to agree on a compromise. Laurel and Iletto are already laying the groundwork for capitulation. While referring to Gringo as "slightly a threat to peace and order of the country," Iletto thanks the military insurgents "for remaining anti-communist". Says he, "I'm not justifying what they have done, but somehow, they have helped the morale of anti-communist groups in the AFP. We will be working together against the common enemy."

If this is indicative of official thinking, Gringo's hands may soon be cleansed of the blood of those who perished as a consequence of his adventure. A compromise based on anti-communism will push the government further to the Right and close the democratic space, thus completing the President's alienation from the people who risked their lives for freedom and social justice in the February Revolution. She will end up a captive of those she now accuses of treason. **K**