

Interview With Antonio Baltazar V. Nebrida, Jr., of the Philippines' NBN TV-4

October 14, 2003

The Philippines' Role in the War on Terror

Mr. Nebrida. Mr. President, the Philippines has taken a position behind just about every initiative that the United States Government has taken against the global fight against terrorism. As a partner in this endeavor, what do you see the Philippines doing further?

The President. First of all, Gloria Arroyo, the President, has been very strong, and I appreciate that. And I appreciate my friendship with her. Secondly, the Philippines has recognized that there is a problem in parts of the country and have asked for some help, some training. And we're more than happy to provide it, because there's no question in my mind the will of the Government is to bring people to justice, and the Government has. In other words, there's a recognition of the problem and a willingness to deal with it.

I think that our relationship is such—it's a very close, longstanding relationship—is such that we will see opportunities to work together, and we will work in concert. I would never ask the Philippines to do something that the Government was comfortable doing, but our relationship is good.

And one key thing that people need to understand is that the war on terror goes on, and therefore, it's important to have leaders who understand that. And the President understands that, and I appreciate her courage.

Upcoming Elections in the Philippines

Mr. Nebrida. Continuing with the program, the Philippines is coming into a very critical phase. We're getting our national and local elections in 2004. Are there apprehensions over the exercise itself, or the outcome of the election?

The President. Well, first of all, there's no apprehension over the outcome of the election. The people—we trust the people in America. We've got our own elections, by the way, coming up in 2004. I would hope that the Philippines would continue to serve

as a good example of democracy in the region, in other words, that there be an inclusiveness and, of course, that the elections be carried off in a peaceful way. It will be a very important election for others to watch, and watch the example of the Philippines' elections. And the people will make the right decision. I know my friend is running again, and she's got a strong agenda to run on.

Filipino Americans

Mr. Nebrida. All right. Close historic links between the United States and the Philippines are seen in the very large and significant Filipino community in the United States.

The President. Yes.

Mr. Nebrida. How do you see the contribution of that particular community in nation-building here in the United States?

The President. Well, first of all, there's roughly 2 million Philippine Americans, which is a wonderful contribution to our country. These people are great people. And I know; I work with them right here in the White House. We've got some great Philippine Americans here that are proud of their country but most of all love America, because we stand for freedom and justice and opportunity. And the Philippine community has provided great contributions in business and arts and civic participation. And I'm really proud that there are that many Philippine Americans who are citizens of our great land.

Upcoming APEC Summit

Mr. Nebrida. You're heading for Thailand. The Philippines—our President is also heading for the APEC meeting there. You will be meeting each other. There are apprehensions over the emergence of bilateral agreements, trade agreements, and regional trading blocs. Is APEC still a relevant organization as far as the United States sees its allies and its partners?

The President. Yes, that's a very good question. It needs to be relevant, because APEC has—that room will fill up with leaders that can do a lot to shape a more peaceful world and a more prosperous world. Trade is a central element of our foreign policy, and many of our trading partners, like the Philippines, will be in that room. And we've

got to talk about free trade and open trade. We cannot—you know, we must advance the agenda of the WTO.

There is a great opportunity to discuss ways to enhance prosperity. And I might remind everybody that this war on terror continues. There's a lot of wonderful leaders that will be in the room who have dedicated themselves to the proposition that we must deal with terror now or be dealing with it in more violent forms later. And President Arroyo is such a leader. So I'm looking forward to having a very frank discussion and a good discussion with APEC. I think APEC is relevant, and I think this meeting will help make it more relevant.

Mr. Nebrida. Mr. President, thank you so much.

The President. Thank you, sir.

Mr. Nebrida. Thank you for this opportunity to be with you, and it's indeed an honor and privilege.

The President. My honor, too. You're welcome. Thank you, sir.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 3:17 p.m. in the Library at the White House, and the transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on October 18. In his remarks, the President referred to President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo of the Philippines. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.

Interview With Thepchai Yong of Thailand's Nation TV

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Thailand-U.S. Relations

Mr. Yong. Mr. President, I understand that during your visit to Bangkok you'll be announcing that your administration will designate Thailand as a major non-NATO ally. What does it mean to Thailand and to Thai-American relations?

The President. First of all, you're a pretty darn good reporter. Secondly, it's probably best that I not reveal what the Prime Minister and I are going to talk about until after we talk about it.

However, having said that, Thailand and the United States are very close friends. The level of cooperation has been really strong, particularly in matters of common interests.

We have a common interest to make sure our countries are secure from terrorism. As you know, the Thai Government very capably—I emphasize “capably”—brought to justice Mr. Hambali, the planner of the Bali bombings in Indonesia, the killer of hundreds of innocent lives. And I really—and it was a piece of really good work. My only point is that we value our relationship and friendship on this key matter.

Of course, I'll be talking economics as well. Our non-NATO ally status is something I want to speak to privately first with the Prime Minister and not on your TV screen, if you don't mind, but it's a very good question. [Laughter]

President's Upcoming Visit to Thailand/ Demonstrations

Mr. Yong. Some of the public opinion in Thailand, like in your country, doesn't always support what the Government does.

The President. Yes.

Mr. Yong. You may admire Thaksin, the Prime Minister, for being supportive of the antiterror campaign. But there are people in Thailand who are not happy with that, against the war in Iraq and, again, your policy of preemption. And there are people who plan to stage a demonstration to demand that you be arrested during your visit in Bangkok. How do you respond to these critics?

The President. [Laughter] Well, I'm—first of all, a society which allows for people to express themselves is the kind of society I admire. I don't expect everybody to agree with my policies, and I appreciate the fact that they are able to express themselves. I'm not so sure I agree with their desire to have me arrested.

Look, some people disagree with my decision to take action against a thug who had been torturing his own people. We've discovered mass graves with hundreds of people that had been buried there, but it's also a man who used chemical weapons. And the United Nations—I didn't act alone. The critics must understand that I was acting in concert with the U.N., who for 10 years—which for years had said, “Disarm.” And finally, I went to the U.N. and said, “Wait a minute. This is time to—let's take care of this man one way or the other, and give him a chance