

CORAZON C. AQUINO

“TOWARDS GLOBAL SHARING AND PEACE”

University of Oregon Commencement Address
June 11, 1995

Let me first of all express my heartfelt thanks to the President and Faculty Senate of the University of Oregon for this honorary degree. As with all the other honors bestowed upon me, I must acknowledge in all humility that all these were made possible not through my efforts alone, but because of People Power and Prayer Power.

In February of 1986, People Power emerged as an awesome political force, banishing the dictator who had resorted to terrorism and massive fraud in the snap election and catapulting me, the opposition candidate, to the Presidency. But the four days of People Power and Prayer Power only signaled the start of a long, arduous process to make our restored democracy truly meaningful and relevant to the lives of our people. As president, I had to impress upon the nation that our work did not end with the restoration of democratic institutions. To survive and flourish, our democracy had to be dominated by an empowered majority, actively involved in mainstream social, political, and economic life. We had to preserve and enhance our restored democracy through the empowerment of our people. We therefore encouraged the organization of Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs), cooperatives, and foundations. Our objective was the improvement of the lives of our people. For, after all, we believe that the essence of democracy is to give the people greater power over their lives.

During my presidency, I worked hard to bring about a participatory kind of democracy and not a passive kind of democracy. I made it possible for the people to enlarge their contact with government beyond elections to its daily workings – so that the vast resources of one support the initiatives of the other, and the policies of government are refined by the insights of the people. An example of this policy was the inclusion of NGOs in the Regional Development Councils. We allowed for twenty-five percent representation of the NGOs in this council, and either the chairman or co-chairman had to be selected from the NGO sector. I also introduced the concept of “KABISIG”, the

Filipino term for linking of arms or joining of hands to connote a partnership. This was the partnership between the Government and NGOs. The Government through the PRESIDENT'S SOCIAL FUND gave money to the NGOs for the school building program. We were able to construct around three thousand school houses under this program. More importantly, because of this GO-NGO partnership, we were able to construct the schoolhouses within budget or sometimes below budget, and on schedule or sometimes even ahead of schedule. We also assisted many cooperatives in their livelihood projects. The "KABISIG" programs have been continued by my successor, President Fidel V. Ramos, and hopefully will be a permanent feature in the Philippine government.

After my presidency, I have continued to work with NGOs. As chairperson of the Benigno S. Aquino Jr. Foundation, I have established the Institute for People Power and Development (IPPD) in order to find ways and means to strengthen self-help initiatives of cooperatives in our country. To a certain extent, cooperative practitioners in the Philippines have attained a measure of political and economic freedom under our democracy. However, while the Philippine cooperative movement has made great strides over the last nine years, much more needs to be done. Our dream is to see cooperatives become major players in the mainstream economy where they can wage an effective front-line attack against poverty. Only when grassroots groups substantially contribute and benefit from national production can terms like GNP mean anything to the majority of our people. For this to materialize, cooperatives have to learn from each other and create synergies that would enhance their respective strengths. The IPPD has already undertaken research of various successful models of cooperative undertakings which show many potential points of take-off, linkage, and interaction among people's organizations throughout the nation. In the years to come, I am certain that cooperatives in the Philippines will further expand their networks and tighten their linkages for optimum synergy and greater economies of scale. We are therefore encouraging cooperatives to take lead roles in the process of development and not to be reduced as passive onlookers who will wait for the benefits of progress to trickle down. Hopefully in the near future, leaders of Philippine cooperatives will be able to share their successful experiences with other developing countries. This message of sharing and cooperation is what I hope to underscore before you today, you the future leaders of America and the world.

Today, we are in the midst of a major paradigm shift in global economics. With the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the eventual implementation of the General Agreement of Tariffs and Trade (GATT) the opening up of markets all over the world is soon to unfold. While we see the vast business opportunities before us, especially for developed countries like the USA, let it be said now that this breaking down of economic barriers must not only serve as a means to amass wealth and fortune. More importantly, we must seriously work closely to establish a more equitable system of sharing the world's resources so that there will be enough for each and everyone in the global family which we are struggling to preserve and nurture.

Threats to global peace are very much rooted in the inequality perpetrated by the selfish few. In the same vein that the spirit of sharing consolidated our forces in the EDSA People Power Revolution to oust a greedy dictator, may we find ways and means of reaching out to each other to preserve and maintain peace all over the world.

Having been president of the Philippines for six years, I have a better appreciation of what public service is all about. Public service is transformative. I believe it brings out the Christian element in our nature, which is in all our religions, and completes a person's life. We can all be used to serving others, so that service becomes not an imposition but a fulfillment – a rounding out of our selves which is not possible living only for ourselves.

I found in public service qualities I did not think I had, and because of Prayer Power, reserves and strength and faith I never suspected. Perhaps not all of us can do it all the time. And I am greatly relieved to be able to live my own life again. But I believe we must all serve others some time. Service to others, service to our communities, and to our brothers and sisters throughout the world can be fulfilling and addictive. The next time your neighbor, your community, or someone somewhere in a country less fortunate than your own calls for help and tempts you again to serve – take my advice – just say yes and find yourself.

Congratulations to all the graduates and their parents. Thank you.