

11. In the book's glossary, *pasyon* is defined as a "play based on the life of Christ (a particular play)." This is a confusing definition since *sinakulo* or passion play, can also be similarly described. The authors could just have restated their earlier definition of *pasyon*, i.e., "biblical stories including the life, death, and resurrection of Christ" (111).

Even if in no certain way will the length of this list affect the conclusions drawn by Amoroso and Abinales, it will be helpful for the readers of the book's future edition—which undoubtedly there will be—if these seeming weaknesses in details sustained by the book will be addressed.—**JOEL F. ARIATE JR.**, UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ASSOCIATE, THIRD WORLD STUDIES CENTER, COLLEGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND PHILOSOPHY, UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES-DILIMAN.

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Jovito Salonga. *The Task of Building a Better Nation*. Mandaluyong: Kilosbayan, 2005. 443 pp.

Jovito Salonga, former senator and statesman, is one of the few politicians who can command great respect from the public and motivate them to support the goals of nation-building. Salonga's idealism and indisputable integrity never fail to inspire the Filipino people. His latest book, *The Task of Building a Better Nation*, was released in an opportune time when the controversies of the 2004 Philippine

presidential election have caused social strife and division. It recognizes that the country is in its trying times. Hence, an effective statecraft, founded on liberal-democratic values, must be employed. The seven-chapter volume is an anthology of Salonga's personally-written speeches and essays as a political leader for more than half a century. The book presents his vision of a just and democratic nation. It summarizes the cardinal values which guide him as a liberal democrat—the respect for the “general will” of the people, the establishment of an open and pluralistic society, a free and responsible press, a representative government, and an apolitical military.

The volume is dedicated to the Filipino youth. It challenges them to take up the cudgels in building a better nation and assist in resolving the three major evils of society: widespread poverty, rampant corruption, and unrestrained criminality. Seven essays elucidate the significant role of the youth as vanguards of democracy, and emphasize that the emergence of youth-led social movements during the Martial Law years mitigated the excesses and abuses of the authoritarian government. A good narrative of the lives and aspirations of nationalists Jose “Pepe” Diokno and Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino provides clear examples for the younger generation to emulate.

By providing a first-hand account of his experiences during the Martial Law period, the author succeeds in linking the Plaza Miranda bombing and the battle of Mendiola to the contentious facets of the Marcos's hidden wealth and the assassination of former senator Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino. Salonga writes, “Obviously from the viewpoint of Marcos, the imposition of martial law would render it almost impossible for the Opposition to know about their ill-gotten wealth” (130). Marcos' jailed his rivals, key opponents and critics and imposed Martial Law to remain in power beyond 1973. A chronological narrative reveals that the Marcos government needed to destroy the democratic opposition by ostracizing former senator Ninoy Aquino from the country's politics (139). These claims are complemented by a discussion of the evolution and character of the Congress; the dynamics of elections and the country's judicial system is also examined.

Chapter four's comparative presentation of Philippine presidents from Quezon to Macapagal-Arroyo endeavors to derive lessons from their contributions and limitations. Salonga contends that “no one in Philippine history, so far, has dominated Philippine politics for 20 years with such aplomb, skill, and self-confidence as did Manuel L. Quezon, the titan of Philippine politics, despite mounting social

unrest and the chilling realities of war” (185). This attitude of conferring high regards to Filipino mavericks also manifest in the senator’s soaring tributes to men who have influenced and shaped his political career like Claro M. Recto, Lorenzo Tañada, Eulogio “Amang” Rodriguez, Cesar Espiritu, Ninoy Aquino, Jaime Cardinal Sin, his pastor Cirilo Rigos, and former Chief Justice Pedro Yap.

Salonga’s Christian convictions cannot be divorced from his assessment of sociopolitical issues. His propositions, especially in ethical issues are both instructive and exigent. As an adherent of social justice, he contends that a Christian’s spirituality must not be limited to building his/her “private stairway to heaven” (260). Faith must be coupled with tangible actions to help the poor, the oppressed and the underprivileged sectors of society. On the dividing line between forgiveness and justice, he writes, “People must be taught that crime does not pay—otherwise the system of justice will break down. In a free and just society, equal justice under the law is not a mere slogan but a basic principle that must be a living reality” (257). Hence, public officials must serve as role models because they are the ones people look up to for inspiration and guidance. Good government rests upon them because public confidence is imperative in the normal functioning of a democracy.

Salonga denounces government programs or actions that contradict ethical standards and undermine democracy and the rule of law. This principle reflects in open letters sent by the senator’s primary organizations, *Kilosbayan* (People’s Movement) and *Bantay Katarungan* (Sentinels of Justice), to concerned state leaders. A correspondence to former President Ramos condemned the Philippine Gaming Management Corporation’s (PGMC) approval of the online lottery system. Ironically, the decision was made after the Ramos administration launched its Moral Recovery Program. Gambling and moral recovery cannot go together since gambling promotes the drive for instant wealth and undermines the Filipino values of “initiative, self-discipline, rational planning, passion for real learning, hard work, honest toil, thrift and perseverance” (199). Similarly, the current efforts by the Arroyo administration to shift the presidential form of government to a federal one did not escape *Kilosbayan*’s vigilant eyes. It recommended that the process must be accomplished in a democratic manner through a constitutional convention rather than a constituent assembly. Another communication was sent to the members of the House of

Representatives pertaining to the impeachment case filed against former Chief Justice Hilario Davide and other Supreme Court justices, saying that the case was “insufficient in substance” and the accused were innocent.

Washington’s preponderance on the country’s politics has been proven detrimental to the Filipino people. A chapter is devoted to the “wars and conflicts” involving the nation. The author argues that without the US military bases, Martial Law could not have been imposed and the Marcos dictatorship would have collapsed after a few years. The legal and political aspect of the RP-US Balikatan (literally meaning shoulder-to-shoulder) exercises as determined by the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) is dissected to prove that the American military had other things in mind when it deployed troops in Mindanao—not just to rescue the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) kidnap-for-ransom victims but also subdue the whole island. An intelligent menu of possibilities is laid down explaining the Philippine government responses to the outcomes of the American military operations in Mindanao vis-à-vis the hostage-taking of the Burnhams, a missionary couple (294-295). The first possibility is that if the Burnhams or some of the American soldiers are killed in the rescue operations, the Philippines could be the next target of America in its “war against terrorism.” Another likelihood is that a successful rescue operation could be used by Washington as a rationale for the prolonged presence of its military in Mindanao. The last possibility is that if the Abu Sayyaf group was captured by the US military, they could be jailed and tried outside the Philippine jurisdiction because the country’s statutes and constitution are vague in punishing the crime of terrorism. These presuppositions are anchored on the author’s analysis of the US’s war on Iraq. George W. Bush’s formulation of the doctrine of preemptive strike proved to be dangerous because it can be used as a grand smokescreen of powerful nations to attack their enemies.

Corollarily, the Philippine government’s support to the US-led wars in different countries (e.g., Afghanistan, Iraq) is a palpable violation of the country’s Constitution which renounces war as an instrument of national policy. Overall, Salonga calls for the nation to “retrace its steps” in order to preserve the democratic and independent character of the country (299). Terrorism has created a moral dilemma for leaders around the globe. Distinguishing a “terrorist” from “a gang of local thieves and criminals” hampers the resolution of violence and conflict initiated by extremist groups like ASG in Mindanao. The

author contends the ASG must not be branded as an “international terrorist group.” Doing so will only flatter the group and put ASG in a status which they do not deserve.

Overall, *The Task of Building a Better Nation* is a must read for students, political analysts, writers and social scientists who desire to explore not only the statesman’s political biography but also the crucial stories which shaped the country’s political landscape. Salonga’s accounts demystify some of the major periods of Philippine history. The elegant, Salonga-style English accounts for the easy-reading of each chapter. The essays validate the fact that the senator is neither a passive observer nor a simple armchair academician. As one of the revered icons of Philippine politics, his wisdom and experience are deeply-rooted to the country’s *realpolitik*. Although already retired from formal government service, his insights on current sociopolitical issues are still highly esteemed and sought by political leaders from various streams. As the Bible declares, “the gray head is a crown of glory, if it is found in the way of righteousness” (Proverbs 16:31).—RONALD C. MOLMISA, RESEARCH FELLOW, THIRD WORLD STUDIES CENTER, COLLEGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND PHILOSOPHY, UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES-DILIMAN.