

INTRODUCTION

IN 1987, PLAYBOY MAGAZINE asked Ferdinand Marcos how he would want his epitaph to read. “Ferdinand: ‘I don’t . . . what’s the lawyer’s epitaph? Here lies a lawyer.’ Imelda: ‘Who lies no more.’ Ferdinand: ‘Who lies still.’”¹

Lie, the Marcoses did, and still do. The power that the Marcoses wielded as autocrats and continue to wield as democratically elected officials cannot be understood separately from how they have used lies to attain it. How is it that the lies crafted during Ferdinand and Imelda’s conjugal dictatorship (1972–1986) remain resilient and effective almost half a century later in a Philippine polity that is more or less democratic? The Marcos lies are enduring and powerful enough to be instrumental still in enthroning Marcos Jr. in Malacañang in 2022.

The essays in this volume provide some tentative answers to this question. We show how the lies were crafted and have shown proof of those who enabled the Marcoses to foster their falsity on their targeted audience, or those who knew the truth but have chosen to be silent. We provide details on how institutions and individuals were corrupted by the Marcoses to ensure that the lies they have made would not easily unravel. If corruption fails, the Marcoses of the martial law years have no qualms in resorting to censorship and the silencing of contrary and critical voices. During the martial law years, the Marcoses had at their disposal the whole state apparatus for propaganda, ensuring that a Marcos lie would not only remain valorized and unchallenged but that it would be repeated in all mediums and avenues used for the dissemination of state information. This was how Ferdinand’s supposed heroism during the Second World War became a foundational myth of his dictatorship. He was the best, the wealthiest, the bravest, the most intelligent Filipino of his generation. Why should he not be the unrivaled and uncontested leader of his people? The book’s first part, “Lying to the Top,” chronicles how Marcos Sr.’s political ascent was in part aided by dissembling and deceit.

The Marcoses have historically excelled at making claims for their benefit that can neither be easily proven or disproven at the time they were made, from the claim that Ferdinand Sr. could not have shot his father’s political rival Julio Nalundasan because there was no witness to the actual shooting, to Marcos’s claims that his guerrilla organization, Ang Mga Maharlika, had no records because no decent intelligence group would have a sizeable archive about itself, to the various events in Marcos’s official biographies that have only two participants, one of whom was either dead or impossible to locate. They would make insertions where

1 Imelda and Ferdinand Marcos, “Playboy Interview: Imelda and Ferdinand Marcos,” interview by Ken Kelly and Phil Bronstein, *Playboy*, August 8, 1987, 61, <https://ia803201.us.archive.org/17/items/playboy-history/Playboy%201987/8%20-%20August%201987.pdf>.

gaps appeared in their history, always trying to be the first and most authoritative sources about themselves, and they embraced (or at least tolerated) folkloric creation (no identifiable author) and transmission (by oral repetition, susceptible to embellishment) of information, burnishing existing Marcos myths.²

They lied even when it seemed utterly unnecessary, seemingly assured that to those who would readily reiterate whatever they say, louder and more passionately, they were infallible. Lying is a pathology of power. As power approximates impunity, the embellished accounts that were meant to persuade people of the alleged truthfulness of the lies became less important than having people, a community of them, that will unquestioningly subscribe to the veracity of every statement that the power-that-be deign to issue. “Lying creates affiliative truths,” Carole McGranahan observed among Americans during the presidency of Donald Trump, that their “responses to Trump are both affective and social in creating communities of both supporters and protesters.”³ The same is true of the Marcoses, then and now. Read the third part of this book, “Lie Low, Lie Back, Lie and Lie Again,” for proof of this observation.

But before a community of sycophants and true believers can be formed, there is that most basic step in lying: a lie must be told to the one it intends to deceive. Ferdinand and her mother Josefa practiced their craft with the US Army and fellow survivors of the Second World War. Mother and son filed frivolous war damage claims for non-existent properties and claims for recognition and back pay for supposed services in ghost guerilla units. The Marcoses started with lying to profit and ended up plundering the state coffer.

For Luise White, “lying is a deliberate attempt not only to conceal, but to conceal well . . . Good lies are crafted, they have to be negotiated with [a] specific audience, and they have to be made to stick—a lie, a cover story, not only camouflages but explains.”⁴ Ferdinand’s Ang mga Maharlika tall tale was bluntly rejected by the US Army and was the subject of biting sarcasm from the likes of Nick Joaquin when Marcos made it a part of his published biography in time for the 1965 presidential election. But Ferdinand was not one to waver in his fabrications. He used his clout as congressman, senator, and president to give flesh to his claims of military heroism and did not stop until a claim could be made for him that he was the most decorated Filipino war veteran.

2 John Reed, “Marcos Myths Lift Dictator’s Son to Power in the Philippines,” *Financial Times*, May 11, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/adc60586-9267-43b5-be3b-f44ad4506d2d>; Cherry Salazar, “Marcos Leads Presidential Race Amid Massive Disinformation,” Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, May 8, 2022. <https://pcij.org/article/8368/marcos-presidential-elections-massive-disinformation>.

3 Carole McGranahan, “An Anthropology of Lying: Trump and the Political Sociality of Moral Outrage,” *American Ethnologist* 44, no. 2 (2017): 243. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12475>.

4 Luise White, “Telling More: Lies, Secrets, and History,” *History and Theory* 39 (December 2000): 14.

Besides the purveyor of lies, lies endure because of those who lend their credibility in spreading and sustaining it. The issue of complicity is less vexing and complicated when the one spreading a lie has authoritarian powers and those made complicit were made to do so under duress or perceived threat. The more vexing and complicated: on why people would tout and subscribe to the legacy of the Marcos dictatorship while enjoying rights guaranteed by the very democratic polity that they would like to be done away with.

When institutions of power, like the courts or historical commissions, acquiesce to a lie put forth by an autocrat, the verification or validation that they offered are not only proof of corruption but also an indicator of their willingness to draw on their institutional mandate to foil any challenge to the lie they now wanted to uphold. The second part of this book, “Lying in State,” offers abundant example of what Hannah Arendt speaks of how the “evils of bureaucracy” facilitate “defactualization.”⁵

As there were institutions that ended up as conduits and defenders of Marcos lies and propaganda, there were those that struggled and had taken every opportunity to point out, not only the lies and venalities of the Marcoses while they were at the height of their power, but also the absurdities that they had tried to pass off as facts of life. Left to her own devices, Imelda would even bend time to her will and lie of the fact that she did try.

Arriving two hours late for a luncheon with 16 women who are and were with media, Mrs Marcos greets each one of her invited guests. Her palms are smooth and thin, one cannot be convinced easily they are of a working person. Her bearing is regal . . . “I must make up for this,” she excuses herself for tardiness, “my watch says it is only 1 p.m.” We women, hardly or not introduced at all to wealth, thank ourselves that we have less expensive watches which accurately point the time at 2:10 p.m.⁶

There was some internal discussion regarding the bluntness of the title *Marcos Lies*. But as we reexamined the bulk of what we had written for more than six years—now compiled with complete sources and expanded, better stated, and/or updated here—it became clear that such candor was necessary. We are engaging with individuals and groups—one family in particular—who claim, untruthfully, to be on the side of truth. They disingenuously reframe falsities in their favor as a side of the truth, equally valid

- 5 Hannah Arendt, “Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers,” in *Crises of the Republic* (San Diego: Harvest Book, 1972), 20.
- 6 Ma. Lourdes Mangahas, “The Heart and Mind of Imelda R. Marcos—‘I Feel My Way Through and Listen to the Cries of the People.’” *Philippine Panorama*, September 2, 1984. Reproduced in *Southeast Asia Report*, October 24, 1984, 17. <https://ntrl.ntis.gov/NTRL/dashboard/searchResults/titleDetail/ADA349950.xhtml>.

with claims firmly rooted in fact, or, in the infamous words of former United States counselor to the president Kellyanne Conway, they offer us “alternative facts.” Arguably, such dishonesty is par for the course for politicians.⁷ But there is a totalization that the Marcoses seek to achieve that aggressively intertwines their lies with our daily life, all seemingly in the service of furthering a bizarre belief: that the presidency or leadership of the Philippines is a Marcos birthright.

Again, this appears to fall well under existing political practices and theory. It recalls Marcosian sultanism (characterized, as with all sultanistic regimes, with personalist arbitrariness) as described by Mark Thompson, drawing from and contributing to the work of H.E. Chehabi and Juan J. Linz,⁸ in relation to concepts such as illiberal democracy,⁹ which both arose at a time when the qualification of “democracy” after the Cold War became necessary, were it to retain at least contemporary descriptive value.

But whereas other autocrats or “strong leaders” during or immediately after the Cold War were able to lean into either preexisting ideologies (variations of Stalinism for Ceausescu and the Kims of North Korea, Pancasila for Suharto) or religion, or both, (in the case of the Duvalier the elder and Gadaffi, and even Lee Kuan Yew’s Confucian “Asian values”) in building their personality cults, Marcos’s presidential personalism was anchored almost entirely on artifice, an ill-defined “democratic revolution” and a “Filipino ideology” purportedly formulated by Marcos Sr. himself, siphoning vampirically, through ghostwriters, from a slew of sometimes contradictory influences.¹⁰ Thus, in describing their theory of sultanism, although Chehabi and Linz list “Marcos’s” *An Ideology for Filipinos* among the written attempts of sultanistic rulers who “like to be thought of as great thinkers” and “[feel] the need to legitimize their regime ideologically,” they were unable to consider “Marcos’s” work among those that “[exalt] the nation’s ancient glories and [draw] on an ‘invented tradition’ to demarcate the nation from its neighbors ethnically and even racially.”¹¹ In short, the justification for Marcos supremacy has been more patently tautological than the rationale for rule of those namechecked here: Marcos is the best equipped

- 7 Lochlan Morrissey, “Alternative Facts Do Exist: Beliefs, Lies and Politics,” *The Conversation*, October 5, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/alternative-facts-do-exist-beliefs-lies-and-politics-84692>.
- 8 Mark R. Thompson, “The Marcos Regime in the Philippines,” in *Sultanistic Regimes*, ed. H.E. Chehabi and Juan J. Linz (London and Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 206-29.
- 9 Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1997, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1997-11-01/rise-illiberal-democracy>.
- 10 Miguel Paolo P. Reyes, “Producing Ferdinand E. Marcos, the Scholarly Author.” *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints* 66, no.2 (2018): 173-218. <https://doi.org/10.1353/phs.2018.0017>.
- 11 H.E. Chehabi and Juan J. Linz, “A Theory of Sultanism 1: A Type of Nondemocratic Rule,” in *Sultanistic Regimes*, 14.

to lead, because the best leader must uphold the ideals of Marcos.

In Imelda, he found another important asset: a partner who could lie as well as he can. At least twice, in the documentary *The Kingmaker* (2019) and earlier, in a 2011 *Philippine Daily Inquirer* interview,¹² Imelda claimed that her late husband bought the sprawling mansion, which later became their conjugal home, way back in 1946, immediately after the Second World War ended. The fourth chapter of this book very clearly shows that the house was bought (with loans) in 1951, when Ferdinand Sr. had already been a congressman for over a year. This was not an error or a “senior moment”—clearly, in the *Inquirer* interview, she wanted to emphasize that the house was bought “three years before [Ferdinand Sr.] entered politics,” i.e., that her husband was already ridiculously wealthy even before he became a politician.

In the same *Inquirer* interview, she claimed that she and Ferdinand Sr. went on a honeymoon around the world “for more than a year”; she had been making similar claims for years, even when her husband was still alive.¹³ This contradicts not only what her authorized 1969 biography says—it was only four months, says Kerima Polotan¹⁴—but logic and fact; what member of Congress would be allowed to go on leave for an entire year? And, tracing the details of their honeymoon with news accounts abroad and their official biographies, it becomes clear that they were not only traveling for pleasure: Marcos brought Imelda along with him to extended work engagements in the United States and Canada, with other members of Congress accompanying them.¹⁵ Again, such claims are not mere bluster or exaggeration—Imelda very clearly wants to make it seem that Ferdinand Sr. was wealthy enough in 1954 to fund an overly long honeymoon that took him away from his official duties.

Marcos lies, as shown in this book, and in the Imeldific statements mentioned above, are subject to escalation, depending on what the Marcoses need. If it must now be maintained that, besides being a war hero and lawyer par excellence, Ferdinand Sr. successfully fought off communism, eliminated malnutrition, ensured that basic commodities were always affordable, brought healthcare for all, made us fully rice self-sufficient, and fathered intellectual

titans like him—all fabrications—to shore up support for their political ambitions, then so be it.

Wading through the various listings of alleged talents and attributes of Ferdinand Sr., one notes the scant mention of a skill he was purportedly adept at even as a child: creative storytelling. “His mother [Josefa] thought he would become a novelist, for he entertained the family dinner table with well-constructed, imaginative tales,” said his first official book-length biography.¹⁶ Foreign observers noted also this, albeit with a more negative appraisal:

A lot of nonsense has been printed about [Ferdinand Marcos Sr.], his rule and the Philippines in general, because of the notion that he, like everyone else, deserved to be taken at his word. Marcos was, as far as veteran reporters were concerned, in the last 10 years or so of his life not capable of distinguishing between truth and fantasy. He invented his own past as a war hero, stole one election after another and all the while ran his country into the ground. He was such an audacious liar that I have known diplomats, who could not at first believe it, to be sick to their stomachs with the way he had manipulated them and the way he manipulated opinion, especially abroad. While eventually he did not have a good press in the West, up to the very end [before his ouster] American editors expected their correspondents to give him the benefit of the doubt, although by then the correspondents were sure he was lying through his teeth and trying to steal yet another election.¹⁷

That is from Karel van Wolferen, writing in 1991 about issues of press in Japan, mentioning Marcos to show how the Western press “is vulnerable to systemic exploitation by powerholders who are quick to spot its wide-eyed innocence.”¹⁸ Van Wolferen cautioned: “In a setting where truth is a negotiable commodity, the modern journalist helps distort the picture by driving journalistic moderation to extremes—by wanting before everything else to give the impression to others that he or she is utterly ‘fair’ to everyone.”¹⁹ If there was any uncertainty about this before, the case of the Marcoses today should erase such doubts. In an information ecosystem where historical accounts, peer-reviewed studies, and critical commentaries commingle with propaganda, “fair” reportage, and textbooks that, contrary to the pro-Marcos assertion, actually do accommodate ap-

12 The Staff/Constantino C. Tejero, “Imeldific at 82,” *Lifestyle.Inq*, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, August 14, 2011, <https://lifestyle.inquirer.net/9585/imeldific-at-82/>.

13 The Staff/Tejero, “Imeldific at 82”; Uli Schmetzer, “The Legend of the Marcoses’ Gold Treasure,” *Baltimore Sun*, November 22, 1997. <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-1997-11-22-1997326006-story.html>; Tim Ryan, “Imelda Is Writing an Autobiography,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, June 17, 1988, 10.

14 Kerima Polotan, *Imelda Romualdez Marcos* (New York: World Publishing Company, 1969), 82.

15 Polotan, *Imelda*, 83; Spence, *Hartzell Spence, For Every Tear a Victory* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 247; “Operation Philippines,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, September 24, 1954, 12; “Conference Honeymooners,” *The Ottawa Journal*, October 8, 1954, 3.

16 Spence, *For Every Tear*, 29.

17 Karel van Wolferen, “Problems with the Nation’s Press,” *The Japan Times* (weekly international edition), December 16–22, 1991, 7.

18 van Wolferen, “Problems.”

19 van Wolferen, “Problems.”

ologia for Marcos rule,²⁰ the Marcoses and their apologists are handily able to attach doubtfulness to established facts and offer fiction as a viable alternative.

Fiction is an appropriate way to describe many of the stories the Marcoses tell about themselves, but they use it differently from the novelists Josefa Marcos thought her eldest would be among. “[Fiction] does not *intend* to mislead,” says Sissela Bok, because “it calls for what [poet Samuel Taylor] Coleridge called a ‘willing suspension of disbelief,’ which is precisely what is absent in ordinary deception” (emphasis in the original).²¹ “Such a suspension of disbelief is a form of *consent*” (emphasis in the original).²²

The Marcoses make no such implicit agreement with their readers and listeners. Bongbong’s immediate predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte, was known to wave off claims that he is lying or insincere by saying, himself or through interpreting intermediaries, that he is merely joking. The Marcoses, in contrast, usually demand that they be taken for their word, even when a fiction disclaimer for what they say is sometimes necessary. If ever they admit to lying (e.g., Ferdinand Sr.’s claims about the declaration of martial law, as discussed in chapter 8 here, and Imee Marcos’s claims about hiding her father’s health condition, as discussed in chapter 18), they explain that the deception was necessary for the general public’s benefit. Bok also reminds us this concerning so-called white lies:

Any awareness of how lies spread must generate a real sensitivity to the fact that most lies believed to be “white” are unnecessary if not downright undesirable. Many are not as harmless as liars take them to be. And even those lies which would generally be accepted as harmless are not needed whenever their goals can be achieved through completely honest means. . . . [It] is fallacious to argue that all white lies are right because a few are.²³

Lying about plans to declare martial law or the truth about Marcos Sr.’s health expose not only a deep distrust and lack of transparency, even toward those for whom completeness of information is necessary to function effectively (e.g., cabinet members who may need to know if the

president wants to become a one-man legislature or, when already in possession of such awesome power, may suddenly need to be on extended medical leave). It also asserts false indispensability: the Marcoses always needed to appear in control, or else we faced societal collapse. In the words of Gene Segarra Navera, “Marcos cast himself as the leader that Philippine society needed—the savior of society as well as the instigator of change.”²⁴

The Marcoses left, but we did not descend into chaos. However, inequality and injustice also continue to be serious problems. Much needed to be done to fix institutions that were damaged well before the EDSA revolt. But distance now allows erasure of those last few years of Marcos the First, when the contrast between reality and the propaganda in glossy coffee table books or government film productions simply became too stark. They and their supporters have the temerity to insist that whatever lies they told then were truly necessary; they have the gall to insinuate that were Ferdinand Sr. still alive today, he would be able to say, “I told you so.”

His son’s election is thus framed by some Marcos supporters as a vindication. We can now sit back and let them course correct the country after decades of being cast adrift. Therein lies the necessity of continuing to call out and analyze false claims about the reign of Marcos the First even after Bongbong Marcos won the presidency partly with the help of their fictions. These lies tend to make Ferdinand Sr. and his policies impervious to criticism, and to maintain their potency, Bongbong must insist upon their truthfulness. When, and how often, will we hear Ferdinand Jr. admit his father’s fabrications and failings, and clarify what was mere propaganda and what was true? Can we reasonably expect him to make such admissions when doing so will also disrupt the various fictions he maintains about himself?

This book is one of many, though perhaps with more detail than most, that show that there is nothing about the Marcoses that make them uniquely fit to behave like royals practicing noblesse oblige. If lying is always necessary to give them a means to show what they can offer, then perhaps what they can offer, beneath all that deception, was never worth considering.

Yet in the past fifty years of contemporary Philippine political history, a significant portion of the electorate that sometimes swell into an engulfing majority have time and again registered with their vote that a Marcos is a must in public office. To this, the tired response is that, if only those that trust the Marcoses with their vote are more discerning, more enlightened. Hence the Marcoses are relieved of the consequences of their lying. They can easily offer perfunctory statements distancing themselves from the scams that bubble forth every so often from the morass of Marcos myths. But there are lies that they simply cannot do

20 Joshua Uyheng, Gilana Kim T. Roxas, and Martina Magpusao Herras, “Veiled Apologetics and Insurgent Nostalgia: Sociogenesis of Contested Memories of the Marcos Dictatorship,” *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 24, no. 3 (2021): 336–348; Maxine Rafaella C. Rodriguez, “(Re)writing the ‘New Society’: A Multimodal Analysis of Marcos’ Presidencies in Two Revisions of *Philippines: Our Land and Heritage*,” *Journal of English and Comparative Literature* 18, no. 3 (2019): 56–98.

21 Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 218.

22 Bok, *Lying*, 75, footnote.

23 Bok, *Lying*, 75.

24 Gene Segarra Navera, “Metaphorizing Martial Law: Constitutional Authoritarianism in Marcos’s Rhetoric (1972–1985),” *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints* 66, no. 4 (2018): 440, <https://doi.org/10.1353/phs.2018.0033>.

without: the greatness of the father, the golden authoritarian years, their hidden wealth as never having come from plunder, their university degrees, are just some of the more prominent ones. In short, lies that constitute their political persona.

The scaffolding of lies was a means in their ascent into power and once in power, the lies became an indispensable part of their narrative that must be preserved through endless repetitions and elaborations by themselves and the Marcos faithful who are all over in cultic communities, scam operations, and troll farms.

The tragedy of writing about lies or discovering ones, is that the lying has been done and the research is after the fact. "Lies are detected by hindsight, and usually only if unsuccessful."²⁵ But one must not stop with detection. In the case of the Marcoses, any lies detected that emanate from them or surfaced for their benefit must be recorded and explained. These must be made a part of their history and public record. Which, of course, they will ignore and not reckon with. In doing so, the Marcoses, bit by bit, conceded a part of the public discourse to those who put on record the truth about their lies. There is still hope that truth might prevail in the end.

25 Anna Elisabetta Galeotti, "Liars or Self-Deceived? Reflections on Political Deception," *Political Studies* 63 (2015): 888. doi: 10.1111/1467-9248.12122.