

The ‘Newspaper of Destiny’ in the Shadows of Martial Law: Historicizing the Varsitarian’s Coverage of the Marcos Years (1970–1981)

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ABSTRACT

Newspapers are arguably the “rough draft” of history. The same aphorism holds true for the *Varsitarian*, the official student publication of the University of Santo Tomas. This paper discusses how the *Varsitarian*, the official student paper of the University of Santo Tomas, viewed and understood the events attended the Marcos years from 1970 to 1981. Using phenomenological hermeneutics, the paper examines how the *Varsitarian* as one of the eminent school papers in the country navigated through the dark years of the Marcos regime, from the First Quarter Storm to the end of Martial Law. The paper utilized phenomenological hermeneutics to determine the historically lived experience of the *Varsitarian* through the textual and contextual interpretation of its staff members’ writings, in effect preserving to the present its relevance in the past in what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls as a “fusion of horizons.” This fusion can be gleaned from the melding of UST affairs with relevant national events during the Martial Law years. Selected *Varsitarian* articles served as narrative lenses to facilitate this fusion of horizons. By also utilizing the descriptive-analytic approach, this paper examined the circumstances behind the *Varsitarian* student writers’ works, which also looked at how students at the University of Santo Tomas coped with the key national and university events that shaped the Martial Law years.

Keywords: *Marcos, Martial Law, destiny, Varsitarian, UST*

Introduction

niversity newspapers are often viewed as insular and elitist, absorbed in a cosmos of “school issues” with little to no interest in the world beyond the sheltered spaces of the academe. However, a few campus papers had long shelved this parochialism to engage the political and social outside the university. Among them was the *Varsitarian*, the 94-year-old student publication of the University of Santo Tomas. The “V” or

“Varsi” as UST alumni and publication old-timers call it, was a living witness to key events during the Marcos regime. This paper examined how the *Varsitarian* as one of the eminent school papers in the country navigated through the dark years of the Marcos regime amid its curtailment of press freedom to fight the supposed enemies of the state and promote a “New Society.”

In doing so, the paper examined the institutional and journalistic challenges the “V” faced while covering and commenting on the Martial Law years. This involved collating and analyzing *Varsitarian* news, opinion, and special reports articles pertaining to the Marcos government, from 1970 to 1981. Much of the articles were extracted from the regular and special issues published by the *Varsitarian* in English and Filipino. The *Varsitarian* articles consumed in this paper were subjected to cross-referencing and corroborated with other relevant historical sources to ensure their veracity and proximity to the actual narrative of events. Correspondence with a *Varsitarian* alumni during the Martial Law years was also included to enrich the narrative.

Phenomenological hermeneutics was utilized to judge the validity of the interpretation of issues and events raised in the paper. Phenomenology deals with the interpretation of experience in relation to the relevant features of the context. This forms the basis of man’s “lived experience.” Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics supplements this by underscoring language’s own historical dimensions. The historically lived experience of the *Varsitarian* was determined through the textual and contextual interpretation of the staff members’ writings and recollection, in effect preserving to the present its relevance in the past in what Gadamer calls a “fusion of horizons.” This fusion can be gleaned from the melding of UST and *Varsitarian* affairs with events surrounding the Martial Law years. In this paper, the *Varsitarian* was the phenomenon and the stories and commentaries it published were the subject of hermeneutic interpretation.

The “V” in the eye of the First Quarter Storm

Jose Guevara,¹ a brilliant journalist, and close friend of then-senator Ferdinand Marcos, once called the *Varsitarian* “the newspaper of destiny.” Guevara knew the “V” as a member of the editor board from 1937 to 1938. He

¹ Jose Guevara was said to have introduced his friend Ferdinand Marcos to Imelda Romualdez. That introduction led to a whirlwind romance that gave rise to one of the most powerful political couples in Philippine history. Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos were central figures during the Martial Law period from 1972 to 1981. Guevara, also called the “Tom Sawyer of Philippine journalism” is one of the *Varsitarian*’s most illustrious alumni.

and many others who came after him held the “V” in high regard. After all, it was the “V” that launched their respective careers as future icons of Philippine journalism. This appreciation for the “V” was never lost among its staffer members in the 1970s. At a young age, they were already exposed to the rigors of presswork and trained under the tutelage of advisers² and teachers who also work as professional writers and journalists. They were steeled and polished in the Spartan workshops of the “V” to challenge the powers-that-be, even if it meant inviting trouble for themselves and for the paper. It was their destiny.

On January 26, 1970, the “V” with its new crop of members, reaffirmed this destiny as it forayed into the opening salvo of the First Quarter Storm. The “V” sent news editor Mario Hernando³, whose Filipino account of the incident, vividly captured what mainstream newspapers also reported in the aftermath of President Ferdinand Marcos’ State of the Nation Address to open the Seventh Congress. He wrote:

Nagsimula ang gulo nang may bumato kay Pangulo at Ginang Marcos...Nagtungo ang pinakamalaking pulutong sa harapan ng Kongreso upang ibulalas ang ilang kagustuhan hinggil sa darating na "Constitutional Convention." Daan-daang mga "riot police" na pawang may mga hawak na pamalo (truncheon) ang pumaligid at pumagitna sa mga demonstrador. Nagkalat din ang mga trak ng bombero at mga "mobile patrol car" ng MPD at Metrocom sa karatig-pook ng Kongreso. Sa kadiliman naman ay naghanay ang ibang mga pulis na katabi ang mga nakahandang kabayo.

Nang mga ikawalo ng gabi ay nagputukan na ang mga baril at kapwa pulis at mga estudyante na ang may hawak ng mga pamalo. Nagliparan ang mga kahoy na pamalo nuong maaga-aga pa. Higit sa 100 ang nasugatan sa pangyayari at mangilan-ngilan ang malubha ang kalagayan.⁴

² Two of these advisers were Celso Al Carunungan and Felix Bautista who were also Varsitarian alumni. Carunungan was a renowned novelist and scriptwriter who won the Filipino Academy of Movie Arts and Sciences (FAMAS) award in 1959. The Varsitarian calls him as “one of the titans of Philippine literature.” Bautista on the other hand was a former news editor of the Philippines Herald and editor-in-chief of the Evening News. He headed the UST journalism department from 1968 to 1972 and was Varsitarian adviser for 16 years.

³ Mario Hernando was Varsitarian news editor in 1970. He later became a renowned film critic and founder of the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino and co-organized the Gawad Urian. He also served as a member of the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board.

⁴ Mario Hernando, “UST kasali sa demo; 5 Tomasino nasaktan, Sen. Emmanuel Pelaez nasaktan sa gulo,” *The Varsitarian*, 29 January 1970, 1.

The violent dispersal hurt around 300 student protesters and 72 policemen. Five of the protesters were Thomasians.⁵ Sen. Emmanuel Pelaez, a Marcos critic, was also injured. In an editorial after the incident, the “V” lambasted the police for implying the supposed involvement of the communists in the violent protest, saying:

Kahit na bago matapos ang kaguluhan, inamin ng mga pulis na hindi ang mga mag-aaral ang nagsimula sa gulo. Sa madaling salita, pinahiwatig nila na ang mga Komunista ang dapat sisihin. Ayon sa ulat-pulis, tinuya ng mga Komunistang "provocateurs" ang mga may kapangyarihan sa pamamagitan ng paghagis ng bato, bote at mga "placards." Kahit na si Pangulong Marcos ay tinanggap ang katotohanan ng ulat-pulis na ito.⁶

By communist provocateurs, the “V” editorial pertained to Communist operatives or sympathizers who infiltrate the student ranks to fuel their rage against the Marcos government. The tenor of the editorial suggests the paper’s leaning toward the student protesters, which was not surprising considering the prevalence of student activism at the time. Some of the “V” members, including its editor-in-chief, Carolina Nuñez⁷, were vocal critics of Marcos and the UST administration. Were they afraid of the repercussions of blasting the high and mighty? Certainly not. Although they cannot be deemed full fledged street parliamentarians, they exuded the same spirit of youthful idealism as student journalists who were trained to speak truth to power and hold erring public officials accountable for their misdeeds. They protest through their pens. It was a risk the “V” staff members of the First Quarter Storm willingly embraced to push their journalism in the social meter of public relevance.

Four days after the Batasan skirmish, riots sparked in separate demonstrations outside Congress and Malacañang, hurting around 700 Thomasians who protested to denounce partisanship in the upcoming 1971 Constitutional Convention, the police brutality during the Jan. 26 march and the shelving of the Ganson Law.⁸ The alleged partiality of the Constitutional Convention as well as the bloody siege of Malacañang and the “Battle of Mendiola” (collectively known as “Bloody Friday”) underscored what the “V”

⁵ “Thomasians” is another term for UST students.

⁶ “Lakas mag-aaral at ang bagong pasismo,” editorial, *The Varsitarian*, 30 January 1970, 8.

⁷ Carolina Nuñez would become a publication assistant of the *Varsitarian* months after Martial Law was declared. She was editor-in-chief in 1970 and a member of the editorial board from 1971 to 1972. She is a professor at the Ateneo de Manila University.

⁸ Republic Act 5546 or the Ganson Law was passed on June 21, 1969. This law, authored by former senator Rodolfo Ganson, prohibits the collection of contributions from students for whatever project and purpose in primary, intermediate, and secondary schools.

termed as “symptoms of a greater national malady.” UST Rector Fr. Jesus Diaz, O.P. called for sobriety and offered prayers to the five Thomasians who died in the riot. While concerns about the Constitutional Convention were legitimate, the rector enticed UST students to “utilize and exhaust to the fullest all possible means to make known their grievances and to seek peaceful remedial action from the proper authorities.” But these words fell on deaf ears as another riot flared on April 1, 1970 inside UST itself.

It was a precarious moment to say the least for the Thomasian community as the grim reality of political unrest slowly crept in. Finger-pointing heated the climate of political discord as student protesters accused authorities of resorting to violence. The Philippine Constabulary on the other hand blamed the student protesters and the communist provocateurs among them for instigating the hostilities even as maximum tolerance was observed. In a matter of days, the streets were transformed into a battlefield of principles and politics, which the “V” boldly treaded with the Thomasian community.

No amount of violence or threats of expulsion (i.e. receiving “love letters” from university officials) would dampen the spirit of activism in UST. As one saying went by: “Kung kailangang gibain ang Main Building⁹, ay gibain.” For the “V” however, suppression was not the answer. The students only wanted the university to “listen to their demands, to present clear statements of disagreement” and to “understand the context of their protests,” the paper said. Youth activism after all meant never having to say yes to anything that stinks.¹⁰ The “V” also attacked the paid hacks and schooled demagogues who shamelessly made a living out of “placard” nationalism:

While it is true that demonstrations are a form of social involvement, it is not the be-all and end-all of nationalism. This has been the constant criticism of the Thomasian as a nationalist. Some university students claim that because the UST student does not participate in rallies often he is not “nationalistic”. But nationalism, it must be remembered, is not only a rally or a ritual of burning effigies. It is rather - in the words of the late Claro M. Recto, “the love and devotion to all that is ours, to all that is of this land which

⁹ The Main Building houses the administrative offices of UST notably that of the rector as the highest university official. In a sense, the Main Building symbolizes power and authority in the university. The Main Building was declared a national cultural treasure a year before the university celebrated its Quadricentennial in 2011.

¹⁰ Josefina Dawatis, “Youth activism,” *The Varsitarian Magazine*, July-August 1971, 11.

was the land of our forefathers and we will still be, if we are vigilant, the land of our children's children.¹¹

Here, the “V” drew the line. While it supported the students’ right to protest for the redress of certain grievances, the paper believed that mere fist-clenching, police-yanking, and campus sloganeering won’t cut. By writing this editorial, the “V” had addressed the misplaced idealism of their fellow students who tend to flirt with grand ideas without crystalizing them into actionable solutions. Results matter than mere lip service. A moving speech or pronouncement is not a silver bullet to decades of poverty or inequality. It requires political patience and social stamina to assemble not just a collection of warm bodies but a movement of like-minded individuals who would not only talk on, but act on, the problem. The “V” knew this for a fact, given its criticisms of the Central Board of Students¹².

It could be true that most “fresh-from-the-bath” and “well-scrubbed” Thomasians never waved placards nor joined “drastic strikes” to express their grievances. They know how to fight for their rights but most of them were just too “afraid of the Dominican priests” and would prefer assailing the priests’ “narrow-mindedness” in private conversations. The students’ passive attitude consequently kept the Dominicans from reviewing themselves, especially with “how they shun reforms, how they abhor radicalism, how they see communism behind every attempt at free expression, how their suspicious eyes find definite failure at the end of every new juvenile endeavor.” The “V” said this even before the First Quarter Storm broke out:

It is a shame how some of us butter up our priests like politicians! ...we have separated the Father from his Brethren. If some of the priests have become overprotective to the extent of being overbearing, we divide the share of the blame with a great many of us who have supplied embarrassingly endless yeses and clinging-vin-like dependence and devotion to the clergy... It is about time that we face the fact that there is no true effective dialogue between the clergy and the layman in this University; not yet, anyway.¹³

This purposeful passivity betrayed the inquiring idealism of student activists in UST as the “V” pointed out. Comparing the Dominican fathers to politicians underscored this apathy to engage authority in meaningful exchanges. Students appeared muted or submissive in the presence of the Dominican fathers like

¹¹ “Not just an angry placard,” *Nationalism and the Thomasian: The Varsitarian supplement*, 30 January 1970, 1.

¹² The Central Board of Students was the student council of UST during this period.

¹³ “Yes father; no father,” editorial, *The Varsitarian*, 1968, 3.

ordinary citizens to politicians, who practically control the destiny of the nation. But the comparison stops there. If anything, the Dominican fathers' power over students was limited only to the four corners of the university, unlike the politicians whose omnipresence permeates the household and the stomach.

Lampooning the Pope and censorship

Months after the First Quarter Storm, the "V" grappled with university censorship after 22 "V" staff members were expelled for lampooning Pope Paul VI in its October 14, 1970 issue of its satire edition "The Vuisitarian." The papal caricature referred to "Popeye Pol IV" who will visit the UST Hospital to undergo a brain transplant in one photo caption.¹⁴ In another article, Popeye Pol IV was depicted to have celebrated the marriage of a seminarian as a broadside to the priestly vocation. UST Rector Fr. Jesus Diaz, O.P. was not spared. He was depicted as a power-monger for having "changed his citizenship to Filipino to retain the rectorship in the University and to calm down the strong clamor for Filipinization by the students."¹⁵

In the same lampoon issue,¹⁶ acting rector Fr. Leonardo Legaspi, O.P. was labelled "Padre Nardong Putik, KM acting proctor magnificent." Photos of Fr. Fausto Gomez (secretary-general), Dean Andres Narvasa¹⁷ (vice rector for student affairs), Dr. Antonio Molina (vice rector for external affairs), and Fr. Florencio Testers (treasurer) carried a caption "Wanted: Dead or Alive" and "most popular juvenile delinquents" of the so-called "Disneyland Boys' Home." In an obvious jab at Narvasa, the "Vuisi" issue also authored a story about "Dean Undress Nabasa" winning the "CBS (Central Brood of Stupids) popular pools" with a congratulatory statement from the rector to wit: "To my most obedient puppet, my warmest congratulations for winning the first CBS popular pools. Now that you are the CBS president, I shall be hoping for the speedy purging of all those who attempted to oust me, not excluding the Coop."¹⁸

¹⁴ "The Vuisitarian," lampoon edition of *The Varsitarian*, 14 October 1970, 3.

¹⁵ The Varsitarian, "The Vuisitarian," 3.

¹⁶ The Varsitarian, "The Vuisitarian," 3.

¹⁷ Andres Narvasa became chief justice of the Supreme Court from December 1, 1991 to November 30, 1998. Prior to this, he was picked by President Ferdinand Marcos, Sr. to be a member of the Agrava fact-finding commission that investigated the assassination of former senator Ninoy Aquino.

¹⁸ The Varsitarian, "The Vuisitarian," 3.

Articles insinuating female student beauty pageant winners as “bomba stars”¹⁹ and the “admission” of 25 girls in the UST seminary “to provide seminarians a well-rounded training and a consoling feminine atmosphere”²⁰ as a pun to the clergy did not escape the wrath of the slighted parties. Even the “V” publications director Celso Al Carunungan was mortified, suggesting that the staffers involved did not consult him before running the ignominious lampoon. Setting aside his role as director, Carunungan wrote the rector on October 24, 1970. As editor, Carunungan found some of the articles done in “bad taste” despite the staffers’ claim to satire. It failed to satisfy the tenets of social commentary based on healthy humor and “without being slanderous, insulting or hurting.” He told the rector thus:

The Varsitarian lampoon, should have, also followed the tradition of lampooning itself - not only calling it “Vuisitarian,” but making fun of the staffers and the way they work. The height of dignity is to be able to take joke on oneself in good taste... The idea is that only the administration can be wrong. Never the staffers. Rather, only the administration people have antics to satirize, and the staffers nothing.

The Pope's inclusion is in absolute bad taste. Not even MAD magazine, which is the apex of lampoons, poke fun at any religious leader, because religion is never to be used for fun. This is standard journalistic ethics, not only godless men in godless countries do this. It is simply immoral, and, therefore, reprehensible in any publications anywhere. The V people should have had the sense to ask professional advice.... I am ashamed as an editor to even think that such a paper was ever put out - and right under my very nose at that.²¹

Carunungan then suggested to the rector “to get the V-people together” and “tell them the legal repercussions of such an abominable job.” It was a “breach of responsibility” that negated his appeal to the administration to lift all forms of censorship to the paper. But the “V” editor-in-chief Rosalinda de Leon²² insisted that “nothing wrong has been done for which amends had to be made.” Apparently miffed by this gesture, Legaspi furnished the involved “V” members with copies of letter-complaints answerable within 72 hours and suspended them as students and staffers. He also requested to see the draft of the next “V” issue but the staff declined “because such proposal implied that the staff

¹⁹ The Vuisitarian,” lampoon edition of *The Varsitarian*, 14 October 1970, 4.

²⁰ The Varsitarian, “*The Vuisitarian*,” 4.

²¹ Celso Al Carunungan. “Letter to the rector.” *Office for Student Affairs files*, 24 October 1970.

²² Rosalinda de Leon was Varsitarian editor-in-chief from June to December 1970. She was the third lady editor in chief of the Varsitarian.

members were incapable of mature judgement.” It also amounts to an infringement on the rightful exercise of campus press freedom. The Thomasian Press Club issued a position paper to protest the suspension of the “V” members but some of the signatories later recanted for undisclosed reasons.

On Nov. 5, 1970, Narvasa as vice rector for student affairs resolved to drop the 21 “V” staffers from the rolls of the university as “undesirable students” and barred them “from further enrolment in any course in the University.” Those meted expulsion were De Leon, Richard Morallo, Reynaldo Panaligan, Diego Cagahastian, Nicolas Gomez, Jr., Rafael Castillo, Ma. Corazon Evangelista, Gil Guzman, Nelson Lee, Marinela Sena, Saturnino Sibbaluca, Arturo Cuevas, Dante Domingo, Romeo Pajarillo, Lucita Abgenila, Nestor Cuartero, Rhoda de Pilar, Virgilio Umandap, Hermogenes Villasenor, Enrique Barcelo, and Pete Reyes. Narvasa maintained that the decision “is not a matter of suppression of press freedom but a requirement to account for its exercise” and a reminder that such repressing actions expose the University “to liability for libel under applicable laws.” He said:

The students were made to understand that the administration regarded their lampoon efforts as *prima facie* offensive, violative of the norms and conduct of a Catholic school... There was no need for extraneous evidence, for whether the publication was offensive or not was determinable primarily by its contents and the publication was apparently the work of the staff members. The claim of the respondents that they have acted in their "capacity as campus journalists and not as ordinary students and therefore they have not violated any established norms of conduct expected of students in a Catholic institution of learning" is so clearly devoid of merit as to deserve consideration, as in the contention that the University is not the publisher of the Varsitarian.²³

The “Popeye Pol IV” controversy hurt the paper’s credibility as it ruffled the sensitivities of people who were not necessarily onion-skinned nor deliberately hostile to the “V”. It was a misjudgment that put the paper in stilts as the UST administration fastened its censorship clips on the “V” to prevent another publicity circus. Of course, the “V” resisted but to no avail. The issue also uncovered the personal politics that seethed among some of the paper’s most talented members. Antonio Lopez, who lost the chief editorship of the “V” to the

²³ Andres Narvasa, resolution on the case of the Varsitarian students, *Office for Student Affairs files*, 15 November 1970.

feisty De Leon, called the latter a “closet communist”²⁴ in one of his columns more than four decades later. He also lamented how the administration handed over the editorship “to a girl editor,” referring to De Leon who turned out to have “embarrassed the university by publishing a lampoon on the visiting Pope Paul VI.”²⁵ The “V” may have weathered the storm in its own backyard but the years leading to the declaration of Martial Law would stir a tempest greater than the First Quarter Storm could muster.

Prelude to Martial Law

On the evening of August 21, 1971, two grenades exploded in a Liberal Party campaign rally at Plaza Miranda, killing nine and wounding a hundred. President Marcos accused the communists and the National Democratic Movement for plotting the now infamous “Plaza Miranda bombing.” The Reds vehemently denied this. Unconvinced, Marcos suspended the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus and ordered the arrest of political activists as a pre-emptive measure to the supposed spate of communist incursions in the metropolis. Despite the Plaza Miranda incident, majority of the Liberal Party candidates won the senatorial election, notably Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino and Jovito Salonga, who was wounded in the bombing. The incident notwithstanding, the “V” pinned its hopes on the newly elected senators presumably to counter Marcos:

Now that the people have spoken in terms of ballots, it is up for the next batch of senators to regain the confidence of the people in the government... We know that many more elections are yet to come and again they will go to the polls to speak. But we cannot deny that they will speak again, this time not by words but by actions which will drown the voices of the ruling class, echoing from the north to the south and will eventually destroy all the vestiges of US imperialism, domestic feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism.²⁶

Short of mentioning the Marcos regime, the editorial carried the “V” staff members’ protracted defiance to the powers-that-be embodied by the administration, amid the manifold of problems facing the country. It likewise

²⁴ Antonio Lopez, “UST and the national dialogue,” Virtual Reality column, *Manila Standard Today*, 12 April 2014. accessed September 18, 2015 <http://manilastandardtoday.com/opinion/columns/virtual-reality-by-tony-lopez/144804/ust-and-the-national-dialogue.html>

²⁵ Lopez, “UST and the national dialogue,” <http://manilastandardtoday.com/opinion/columns/virtual-reality-by-tony-lopez/144804/ust-and-the-national-dialogue.html>

²⁶ “Victory for the NP?,” *The Varsitarian Magazine*, November-December 1971, 9.

served as the paper's call to rally the people behind the opposition, which reflected the idealism of the student movement in and out of UST. Sure, the opposition personalities were no saints. A few of them matriculated in the same school of politics as Marcos. They have their own agenda. But none of them came close to matching Marcos political guile. Using the growing communist threat as a pretext, the president seized the initiative to stay in power beyond 1973. After all, he needed ample time to map out a brilliant strategy to defeat the wily Reds. By doing so, he would also keep political enemies away from the levers of power. He was no doubt girding for Martial Law as the final option. Marcos' men notably Information Minister and "V" alumnus Francisco Tatad²⁷ had stressed a couple of times the necessity of mounting a "creeping Martial Law." But the "V" objected, saying:

The president knows well that this is an extreme measure which necessity alone can justify. Maybe the necessity is his. Yes, he needs it to hold on to office. And such declaration must be founded upon the principle that the state has the right to protect itself against those who seek to destroy it; just as every man has the right to self-defense. Who seeks to destroy the government? Will the people themselves? Don't we subscribe to the principle of republican institutions that sovereignty resides in the people and all government authority emanates from them?²⁸

There was no love lost between the "V" and the Marcos government even if one of the president's young lieutenants – Tatad – used to be part of the paper. The "V" staff members were obviously skeptical of Marcos' plan to declare Martial Law as an ultimate recourse against the looming communist insurgency. They were suspicious of Marcos' motives even if on paper, the president was constitutionally empowered to raise the defense of the state against perceived and actual enemies. The public clamor for Martial Law was absent, therefore the president had no right to usurp the will of the people, the editorial implied. Marcos allies may have deemed this youthful haranguing no better than political hogwash coming from students whose misplaced idealism and vendetta had sorely clouded their judgement. They were biased against a regime, which only sought to protect the nation, or so it was said. Yet the

²⁷ Francisco Tatad was Varsitarian literary editor in 1960. He told the author that he applied as editor-in-chief but was not chosen for his views which often clashed with the Dominican fathers at the time. Virginia Jean Pope, who became the first female Varsitarian editor-in-chief was picked, instead of Tatad. He was offered the managing editor position, but he declined and worked as a Manila Bulletin reporter and foreign correspondent before Marcos appointed him information minister in 1969. Tatad would later become a senator from 1992 to 2001.

²⁸ Ricardo Santi, "Exactly what is martial law?," *The Varsitarian*, 5 February 1971, 2.

questions raised by the “V” editorial pointed to a bigger query: Who really wanted to take the country by the neck? Was it the communists or the Marcos regime itself? Both would claim deliverance from political unrest, economic instability, and social degeneration. The “V” staff members were as confused as the Filipino people.

But amid the spate of confusion and uncertainty, UST Rector Fr. Leonardo Legaspi, O.P.²⁹, had earlier advised the Thomasian community from engaging in violent upheavals and its supposed religious underpinnings. He called this so-called “theology of violence” anathema to the present scheme of things:

Churchmen and moralists have taught that insurrection demands a consensus of the majority, or at least of the most responsible and representative element in society, and provided all legal and peaceful means have failed... There cannot be a theology of violence, because violence is by definition, power not regulated by reason and therefore, not human, but sheer animal power. Reason therefore is what we need most today. Reason is opposed to violence; reason is dispassionate; reason is deliberate. Reason, is indeed, the proper function of a university - the search for truth through reason.³⁰

With Martial Law on the horizon, Marcos began calibrating his vision for a New Society, a bold attempt supposedly to cure the ills that plague Philippine life. Nonetheless, this restructuring of Philippine society was greatly opposed by the Communist Party of the Philippines and its armed wing, the New People’s Army, which operated mainly in the countryside. Given the enormity of problems spawned by the communist threat, Marcos’ staunchest allies in Congress resolved to keep him behind the wheel a little further to presumably right the ship. They then proposed to extend the president’s term by overhauling the 1935 Constitution in the 1971 Constitutional Convention (Con-Con). The “V” stopped short of judging the Con-Con and its intentions, given the presence of a few delegates who showed independence amid the sway of politics-as-usual. “V” poet-columnist Manny Aragon strung up a few verses to convince readers to watch the convention closely against opportunists and freeloaders, both from the administration and the opposition. He wrote:

²⁹ Fr. Leonardo Legaspi, O.P. was the first Filipino rector of UST, holding the office from 1971 to 1977. Legaspi also became archbishop of Nueva Caceres and was president of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines from 1988 to 1991.

³⁰ Leonardo Legaspi, O.P., “There is no theology of violence,” *The Varsitarian*, 5 February 1971, 9.

Hindi dapat ihalal ang ilang ex-politico
na ibig pang sa Kumbensyo'y maihalal na pangulo;
noong sila ay dati pang opisyaes ng gobyerno,
sila bagay'y nagka-rekord ng malinis sa publiko?
May nasangkot na isa d'yang sa public works ay nang-kickback,
may nasangkot kay Stonehill sa suhol na limpak-limpak.
may ilan d'yang sa negosyo'y "oligarch" ang kamag-anak,
at marami sa suporta'y Palasyo ang humahawak.
Bakit kaya nang sumapit ang panahon ng Kumbensyon
ang directive niyang PC ay ginawa lamang ngayon?
Para kaya ang Pangulo ay mabigyan ng "proteksyon"
upang kanyang isa-kamay ang poder sa Konstitusyon?³¹

Aragon's sharp lines justified itself when one Eduardo Quintero³², a Con-Con delegate from Leyte exposed how some of his colleagues received "lobby money"³³ to vote against a resolution³⁴ barring Marcos to seek another term. On June 4, 1972, Con-Con president Diosdado Macapagal wrote a letter to Marcos and his wife Imelda, "requesting" them to publicly renounce their political ambitions beyond 1973. But this gesture was troubling, considering Macapagal's "dithering stance"³⁵ on the Quintero expose and the "ban Marcos proposal."³⁶ Why the sudden turnaround? Quoting Con-Con delegate Tonypet Araneta of Manila, the "V" simply dismissed the Macapagal letter as a charade. However, his gross aversion to decisively act on the controversial issues proved worse. The "V" crucified Macapagal for failing to assert his leadership as Con-Con president. His political ambivalence spawned an "unwieldy body caught in a quandary and unable to chart its course," far from the ideal "alternative to a bloody revolution."³⁷

³¹ Manny Aragon, "Subaybayan ang kumbensyon," *The Varsitarian*, 4 June 1971, 16.

³² "Looking back: The 1971 Constitutional Convention," *Newsbreak*, accessed September 28, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180524013255/http://archives.newsbreak-knowledge.ph/2003/02/17/looking-back-the-1971-constitutional-convention-2/>

³³ The lobby money contained P11,150 and divided into 18 envelopes handed over by lobby agents allegedly sent by the Samar-Leyte group which included First Lady Imelda Marcos. Quintero named 14 persons, 12 of them were Con-Con delegates who allegedly received the lobby money.

³⁴ The resolution was penned by Cebu delegate Napoleon Rama. The resolution was signed by 176 of the 206 delegates but was never carried in the final draft of the new constitution after Marcos declared Martial Law. Rama was later jailed along with other opposition delegates.

³⁵ Carolina Nuñez, "DM note to FM, a mere 'palabas'?", *The Varsitarian*, 9 June 1972, 8.

³⁶ Nuñez, "DM note to FM," 8.

³⁷ Nuñez, "DM note to FM," 8.

Proclamation 1081 and the “V”

On September 21, 1972, Marcos signed Proclamation 1081³⁸ placing the country under Martial Law. Two days later, he went on air to formally announce the declaration to “save the republic” from the imminent danger of communism. Information Minister Tatad, who called the communist threat an actual situation on the ground³⁹, read the proclamation on national television in the afternoon, coinciding with the arrest of perceived communist sympathizers and Marcos opponents, among them were veteran journalists. Major media outfits were sequestered and handed over to Marcos cronies.

Various government offices and business firms in Metro Manila were bombed. The Manila Hotel, which hosted the Con-con was also targeted. Things came to a head when on September 22, 1972, the convoy of then Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile was ambushed in San Juan by alleged communist operatives. Enrile would later admit that the ambush was just staged to make the declaration of Martial Law “look good.” The ploy worked, sowing chaos and confusion among the citizenry, the “V” staffers included. Days before the Enrile ambush, then-chief editor Maria Corazon Evangelista wrote:

The people are wondering why a nation with such a gargantuan military budget can be so unsafe. With all the money to spare, the military is at least expected to be able to protect the people from this wave of violence. As it is, all we ever get from the military intelligence are reports that this or that NPA commander has entered the city – apparently in full view of the law enforcers.

The people don't ask to be informed of the complete hierarchy of the NPA; they just want to feel secure and protected. They wouldn't want to think that the next time they shop around for a pair of shoes, they will be blown to bits instead.⁴⁰

Evangelista's tone typified the pessimism of the times. Like the rest of the nation, the “V” members were worried of the communist onslaught in the capital. The article practically chided the military to produce results by capturing the perpetrators and restoring a sense of security among the people –

³⁸ Proclamation 1081, s. 1972 was signed by Marcos on September 21, 1972 but Martial Law was fully implemented only on September 23 with the arrest of several opposition members and journalists critical of the administration. The superstitious Marcos chose the 21st day of the month because it was divisible by 7, which he considers a lucky number.

³⁹ Anthony Andrew G. Divinagracia, “Former Senator Francisco “Kit” Tatad: Thomasian Statesman.” *The Varsitarian Breaktime Magazine*, June 2007, 7.

⁴⁰ Ma. Corazon Evangelista, “Preparing for martial law,” *The Varsitarian*, 15 September 1972, 10.

martial law or no martial law. In an editorial days before Marcos declared Martial Law, the "V" reminded the government:

...one should remember that hungry people do not submit to arms. The prime necessities of life must first be made available to the people. If they continue to suffer, the most dire of the threats and the most flagrant display of armed might will not deter them from seeking solutions — by violence, if need be.⁴¹

Suffice it to say, some members of the "V", at least during this period, understood the country's predicament. But Martial Law to stamp out the enemy, would soon rear its ugly head to the chagrin of the current and future members of the paper.

Father Legaspi issued directives related to the general rules of Martial Law, among them were additional guidelines and regulations to supplement the Student Handbook. He also released a list of organizations considered by the Department of National Defense as subversive, and banned the "preparation, publication, distribution, or possession of unauthorized publications, papers, pamphlets, manifestos, posters, placards, banners, streamers, or any other form of graphic materials"⁴² which sought to criticize or discredit the government and the New Society. Student councils were also banned to thwart the supposed leftist recruitment in colleges and universities. By 9:30 pm, the university premises must be cleared. Only books, notebooks, and required equipment should be brought to school. Portfolio, attaché cases, and similar containers, bags, packages as well as cars were subjected to random inspection.

In a convocation almost a month after Martial Law was declared, Legaspi sought the help of the faculty to "maintain discipline" by preventing students from joining protests that "could be deemed sufficient cause for the closure of the University."⁴³ He also noted the suspension of certain freedoms under the Constitution like freedom of speech and of the press. "Suspension of these freedoms means that we can no longer criticize government,"⁴⁴ he said.

⁴¹ "Toward a military regime," editorial, *The Varsitarian*, 15 September 1972, 8.

⁴² "Fr. Legaspi issues directives relating to Martial Law," *The Varsitarian*, 17 November 1972, 4-5.

⁴³ Leonardo Legaspi, O.P. "The University under Martial Law." *The Varsitarian*, 22 November 1972, 2.

⁴⁴ Legaspi, "The University," 2.

Despite supplementing the directives of the New Society, Fr. Legaspi felt the weight of the situation, but instead of opposing a strongman who had significantly altered the political landscape in just a few years, the rector decided to “cooperate” so as not to jeopardize the university. With a frank yet uneasy tone, he enjoined faculty and non-academic personnel, and students to do the same, and show “willingness to undergo minor inconveniences in the interest of adequate security.” But as a “realist,” he left a firm reminder to UST officials and faculty members who clandestinely support the communist cause:

Look into yourselves, please. Search your hearts and examine your souls. Are you committed to an ideology which seeks to destroy institutions such as the University of Santo Tomas, an ideology which rejects the kind of education that it offers? Does this ideology of yours seek to overthrow the present government and substitute a godless one in its place?

If you belong to this group, then I say to you most earnestly: leave the University now and do what you feel you must do. For if you stay here, if you disguise your true beliefs and then working undercover, you disseminate your ideas to your students, you would be making them subversives under the law. You would be exposing them to the terrible penalties of subversion under martial law. And you could become the cause for the permanent closure of the University. But if you are really a committed Maoist, you probably would not care what happens to the University.... If you believe you cannot do this, if your convictions and your conscience stop you from cooperating, please, I beg you: resign your position.⁴⁵

Fr. Legaspi’s realism was not just a show of expediency. It was consistent to the Church magisterium that condemned the many teachings of Marxism and Maoism, which include the denial of the existence of God. More than that, it pitched for the survival of the university from a heavy-handed rule. As rector of Asia’s oldest university, Legaspi cannot hold the thought of the government closing the school for “no less than 33,342 students would be shut out from their classrooms, their education deferred, their careers imperiled. Some 626 employees would be rendered jobless. And 1,344 faculty members worth 5,376 dependents would be thrown out of work, their talents wasted, and their noble mission aborted.”⁴⁶ For Jones Campos⁴⁷, a “V” alumnus who studied in UST in

⁴⁵ Legaspi, “The University,” 2.

⁴⁶ Legaspi, “The University,” 2.

⁴⁷ Jones T. Campos was a Varsitarian editor during the early years of Martial Law. He was sports editor from 1973 to 1974. Before joining the “V”, he was part of “The Flame,” the college paper of the UST Faculty of Arts and Letters. Prior to entering UST, he was expelled from St. Louis University and its student paper “The White and Blue” in Baguio as a student journalist and activist. He was also

1973, it was natural for the university to toe the line for pain of government reprisal. The administration kept its students from the clutches of communism by focusing them on academics and sports.⁴⁸ This eventually bore fruit as the university and the "V" was spared from the daily chaos of arbitrary raids, arrests, search and seizures, and other disruptions. Campos recalled:

From 1973, the tension brought about by Martial Law in 1972 have somehow eased down... Student activism was way off the university. There could be some remnants of them but the "V" did not see upheavals or movements (in the university).

Only a few (staff members) remained after the controversial lampoon (Popeye Pol IV) issue. Our publication director in Prof. Felix Bautista Sr. saw to it that the paper was purely student journalism. The rules were made clear and his staff assistants Josie (Josefina) de Luna and Rory (Aurora) de Guzman double checked the articles before it went to Sir Felix (Bautista).⁴⁹

Campos and his fellow staff members did not consider the publication director's article-checking as a form of censorship. They trust the judgement of Bautista as publication director. It was also a way to protect the "V" and UST from the clutches of Martial Law operatives. He added:

Most of us are journalism students so we knew beforehand what can be written or printed... Nobody wanted Martial Law. But we were living in dangerous times. The propaganda machinery of the government was really strong and most student publications were somewhat infiltrated.⁵⁰

After Martial Law was declared, the "V" temporarily ceased publication for more than three weeks before it could issue its ninth edition on November 17, 1972. Some campus newspapers were suspended, except those with express written authority from the rector and a publication permit from the Ministry of Information like the "V." Information Minister Tatad, a "V" alumnus was

detained at Camp Servellano Aquino in 1972 for alleged leftist activities. He later became head of Globe Telecom's public relations office before establishing his own firm, Jones PR/ J.T. Campos Corporation. Campos was also a former president of the Public Relations Society of the Philippines.

⁴⁸ UST was one of the top schools in the Universities Athletic Association of the Philippines in the 1970s. Although it did not win the centerpiece men's basketball title in that decade, the school was known in other sports such as baseball, volleyball, swimming, and athletics, among others. But during the first two years of Martial Law, some sports were not held by the UAAP like volleyball, tennis, athletics, and baseball.

⁴⁹ *Correspondence via email with Jones T. Campos*, 28 September 2022.

⁵⁰ Campos correspondence, September 28, 2022.

instrumental to the paper's continued operations amid the suppression of anti-government newspapers and mass arrest of journalists critical of the Marcos regime. At the time, no newspaper or publication can operate without obtaining clearance from the Ministry of Information. As a student organ, the "V" rejoiced the granting of press freedom to the local campus press, which enjoined the administration from appointing a Dominican father as "publications moderator" to exercise censorship. It then left the oversight of the paper to the publication director alone.

The "V" published in its November 17 issue, the Department Orders pertaining to the New Society, in consonance with the declaration of Martial Law. The order mandated school authorities to "take disciplinary action against faculty members, employees, and students"⁵¹ who would actively participate or encourage involvement in subversive organizations, insurgency, or other similar illegal activities. The penalty ranged from indefinite suspension to expulsion. Schools defying these orders "shall be closed and their bonds shall be confiscated and/or their permits/recognitions shall be cancelled or revoked." Putting a cap on academic freedom, the order also directed teachers to "refrain from discussing subject matters related to politics or rallied issues that tend to create or lead to disorder, chaos or confusion in their students or audience talks and/or activities that tend to inflame, incite or lead the students or audience to commit acts, which are violative of existing laws particularly Proclamation 1081."

Heeding Legaspi's call, the "V" did not to publish commentaries against the Marcos regime. From the last two months of 1972 until the first week of September 1974, the paper did not publish an opinion page, focusing its content on campus news, features, sports and various literary forms such as poems, essays and short stories, among others. Campos called this part of "the editorial policy to focus on university happenings and developments."⁵² The news items tackled only university issues, particularly the achievements and nuances of the Student Organizations Coordinating Council (SOCC), which served as the de facto student council. Soon after, the "V" restored its opinion page focusing mainly on campus issues.

On September 10, 1974, the "V" welcomed the return of its opinion page as well as the Cross section and Last Word.⁵³ The Cross Section served as a

⁵¹ "Department Orders of the New Society," *The Varsitarian*, 17 November 1972, 4.

⁵² Correspondence via email with Jones T. Campos, 28 September 2022.

⁵³ "On the V pages," editorial, *The Varsitarian*, 10 September 1974, 16.

repository of ideas, which are “presented as food for thought and discussion” while Last Word was a space designated to air the “opinions, comments, and grievances” of students and faculty. In June 1975, the paper mounted a new section called Research and Special Reports (now Special Reports), which became its platform for in-depth reporting. But in that fledgling platform, the “V” was subsequently scored for its parochialism for refusing to tackle national issues. In a column, “V” editor-in-chief Eugenio “Gene” Ramos⁵⁴ responded to a letter from one Mauro Oreta, a University of the Philippines student, who scored the paper for its “so intellectual” and “highfalutin” content while ignoring issues such as the US bases, the economic power of transnational corporations, the myth of overpopulation as the cause of poverty, and the irony of promoting tourism”⁵⁵ among others. Oreta also urged the “V” to be like the *Philippine Collegian* of UP and *The Scholastic* of St. Scholastica’s College. To this, Ramos replied:

As things are, there are many issues local and particular to the Thomasian community which need to be written about. There are irregularities to be exposed, achievements to be commended and encouraged, and improvements to be worked for. We practically have our hands full. Why should we opt to write about issues we are not authorities in and which we cannot do anything about? The Varsitarian, after all, is a campus paper. Why should we duplicate the articles we read in national papers?⁵⁶

If anything, the paper simply stayed to the course set by the Legaspi directives on the General Instructions of the New Society back in 1972. To say the “V” had slipped in passivity is to overlook the paper’s militancy against university policies deemed inimical to student interest. One could argue that part of these policies is to ensure that the “V” does not line its guns at Malacañang and drag the university into the pit of closure. But the paper’s editors in the latter part of the Martial Law years refused to sail outside campus issues until the Marcos regime’s censorship sharks left the waters. On several occasions however, the “V” would stick its nose outside the gates of UST to tackle national issues, such as the state of press freedom in the country. In one editorial, the paper exclaimed the truth should never be compromised even under a controlled media environment:

⁵⁴ Eugenio Jose Ramos was Varsitarian editor in chief from 1979 to 1980.

⁵⁵ Eugenio Jose Ramos, “Does the ‘V’ alienate?” *The Varsitarian*, 30 September 1978, 8.

⁵⁶ Ramos, “Does the ‘V,’” 8.

It is a fact that it is difficult to achieve credibility, and much less potency, in an atmosphere of control and restraint. But this does not mean that the government and the press have to live in constant distrust of the other. This does not imply that either the government or the press is less able to fulfill its role in society. A controlled press can still be active within the limits set for it. It can still aid in human development and the furthering of national goals. Therefore, while this “complex situation” exists, we shall hold that a controlled press is better than no press at all, as long as it does not compromise the truth.⁵⁷

The “V” may have deliberately side-stepped Marcos – the chief architect of this controlled media environment – to avoid an unwanted political ruckus. For all its militancy and idealism, it willed to wear the shackles for as long as its hands can write and print, even if it meant clasp the irony of upholding press freedom in an atmosphere of manufactured truths.

The “V” also welcomed the re-emergence of student activism to snap the growing political apathy of the public.

However, the persistent lore of radicalism among student activists was not something worth extolling. Seminarian Rolando dela Rosa⁵⁸, who would later become UST rector, noted the disrespect for compromise by two “extreme student positions” - the hippies who doffed and damned all issues and advocated an “I-don’t-care” ideology; and the radicals who cared so much, parroting Marx, storming the bastions of society in the name of their “enlightened” political creed.⁵⁹ While some of these grumblings are valid up to a certain point, activism must still be tempered by a sense of realism⁶⁰, Dela Rosa said.

Since the banning of student councils in 1972, the “V” assumed the role of mouthpiece and moderator for the Thomasian community. The SOCC, which served as de facto student council cannot completely veer away from its role as the umbrella of all student organizations in the university while attending to its

⁵⁷ “Even a controlled press should not compromise truth,” editorial, *The Varsitarian*, 20 November 1978, 6.

⁵⁸ Rolando dela Rosa was a witness writer of the *Varsitarian* in 1978. He would later become UST rector twice, from 1990 to 1998 and from 2008 to 2012. He was also a former chairman of the Commission on Higher Education from 2004 to 2005. He is a columnist of the *Manila Bulletin*.

⁵⁹ Rolando dela Rosa, “Students and politics: Lest we take to the streets again,” *The Varsitarian*, 28 August 1978, 3.

⁶⁰ dela Rosa, “Students and politics,” 3.

own issues. In 1976, Marcos penned Letter of Instruction (LOI) No. 438⁶¹ to allow the establishment of students' associations, fraternities and sororities in colleges and universities. The "V" and some student sectors in the university saw this as a prelude for the reinstatement of student councils, but the education ministry immediately dashed these hopes, saying LOI 438 only pertained to associations "along economic and social or cultural areas," leaving student councils out of the equation. Most university officials also vacillated with the idea of asking the education and defense ministries to include the student councils in the clarified instruction.

Notwithstanding the violence, deception, and profligacy that typified the last six years following the declaration of Martial Law, the "V" celebrated its 50th anniversary on January 16, 1978 with an exhibit and an alumni gathering attended by some of the most established names in Philippine media. In an editorial,⁶² the "V" shared one of the reasons behind its alumni's enduring bond of solidarity across generations:

For the Varsitarian is not only a training ground where talents are honed to their best. More, it is where the seed of kindred spirit is planted, grows and blooms into an efflorescence recognized not only by the staffers themselves but by the rest of the university community. It is in this atmosphere replete with fraternizing that has solidified groups from the founding fathers of the 20s, the peer groups of the 30s, the post-war staffers, the Oslans of the 50s, the fighting kids of the 60s, the Sisterhood of the 70s and the children of Balayan⁶³ of the present.

Its fifth decade was also marked by the restoration of its tabloid format and the re-issuance of the "V" in Filipino. The first full Filipino issue of the "V" came out in August 1971 as a renewed support to the celebration of *Burwan ng Wika* or the National Language Month. But it was not sustained the following years until 1975 when the staff began institutionalizing it until now, despite accusations of projecting token nationalism. The 1975 staff explained itself thus:

Minarapat naming ilabas ang Varsi sa wikang Pilipino sapagkat aming kinikilala ang lumalaking pangangailangan at kahalagahan ng wikang Filipino sa pang-araw-araw na buhay. Hindi lingid sa aming kaalaman na ang sariling wika ay siya pa ring malakas na

⁶¹Ferdinand Marcos. "Letter of Instruction (LOI) No. 438, s. 1976." *Official Gazette*, accessed September 28, 2022, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1976/07/23/letter-of-instruction-no-438-s-1976/>

⁶² "All in the V family," editorial, *The Varsitarian*, 16 January 1978, 4.

⁶³ Balayan, Batangas was the common venue for the 1980s staffers' retreat and team-building.

kasangkapan sa pagkakaisa patungo sa katatagan ng isang lipunan... Kailangan natin ang Pilipino upang hindi maging katawa-tawa ang ating bansa sa mata ng mga kapwa bansa, upang malaman ng lahat na hindi tayo parang papel na sumisipsip sa kahit anong bagay na mapatak, at upang tuluyang maalis ang masamang implikasyon ng kolonyalismo.⁶⁴

Reporting the 1977 Referendum

The sting of military rule did not intimidate nor hinder the “V” from reporting the Dec. 17, 1977 referendum⁶⁵ which called on the people to categorically answer (by Yes or No) the question: “Do you vote that President Ferdinand E. Marcos continue in office as incumbent president and be prime minister after the organization of the Interim Batasang Pambansa as provided for in Amendment No. 3 of the 1976 amendments to the Constitution?” The Special Reports team conducted an opinion survey⁶⁶ with majority of respondents (540 out of 1,074) voting “yes” to keep Marcos in power. Their reasons were encapsulated in the following answers⁶⁷: 1.) No one could be as capable and brilliant as President Marcos; 2.) He is a true leader and has all the qualities of a good leader; 3.) They are already contented with the peace and order prevailing in the country at present; 4.) They favor the changes and the projects being initiated and executed by President Marcos. Meanwhile, those who voted no (366 out of 1,074) believed that: 1.) The referendum is a waste of time, money, and energy; 2.) It is just a farce; 3.) The president does what he likes anyway; 4.) They don’t want the present government; 5.) Why not give others a chance? and 6.) The country is not yet prepared for a parliamentary form of government.⁶⁸

The “apathetic” or “I don’t care” votes practically repeated some of the misgivings of those who said “No” yet with ambiguous reasons. But apathy, in the concert of Martial Law, is just an interlude to fear. The “V” knew where the students – and their fear – were coming from, with the nagging travesty, if not duplicity posed by the referendum under a climate of military rule even before the referendum was laid out in public:

⁶⁴ “Isang bansa, isang diwa, isang wika,” editorial, *The Varsitarian*, 10 August 1975, 8.

⁶⁵ The referendum was mandated by Presidential Decree No. 1229, s. 1977. For reference, see <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1977/10/30/presidential-decree-no-1229-s-1977/>

⁶⁶ “Referendum question: A public opinion survey,” *The Varsitarian*, 2 December 1977, 5 and 7.

⁶⁷ *The Varsitarian*, “Referendum question,” 7.

⁶⁸ *The Varsitarian*, “Referendum question,” 7.

To give the people a referendum as a means of expressing their views and opinion while freedom does not exist is a bitter joke... How can the people express their approval or rejection of that which holds them in far, while it all the time looms around them? In the words of a former senator, how are we to deal with the irony, the tragedy of being constrained to use an instrument of freedom and the expression of human rights to "forge the chains of our own bondage?"⁶⁹

The "V" then called the opposition to participate in the April 7 Batasang Pambansa elections as the first step toward political normalcy. Boycotting the polls will simply legitimize the dominance of the Kilusang Bagong Lipunan (KBL) and the alleged excesses of the regime.

Martial Law ends

The so-called reform initiatives of the New Society were Marcos' answer to the impending economic crisis spiked by the scarcity of oil supply due to the Gulf War of the 1980s. But to convey the message of continuity, local elections were held on January 30, 1980. Albeit short-noticed, the president thought it was time to overhaul the bureaucracy from stagnant leaderships that had persisted since 1972. However, Marcos' idea to restart grassroots governance was dismissed as a poor attempt to enthrone Malacañang's allies to beef up the KBL machinery in the local political scene just like the 1978 Interim Batasang Pambansa elections. Other groups protested the short period of time to know the candidates. The "V" though urged the Thomasian community to vote, despite the pre-conceived results in favor of the KBL. It said:

The same deplorable pre-election conditions will again surface and cushion the one-way deposition of wealth in only a rich few while the poor majority suffers the adverse effects. The election, deliberately or indirectly, attempted to lessen the impact of the situation and to compensate for its ill effects. How politics can be used to blanket the gravity and intensity of national problems and issues is a classic example of effective maneuver by the ruling power. The elections succeeded, not long the proper objectives for which they were demanded by the people, but in causing temporary numbness to a restless action.⁷⁰

But the "V" criticism on the election fell on deaf ears as the KBL won majority of the local seats to cement the Marcos regime's foothold of power in local

⁶⁹ "A contradiction of terms," *The Varsitarian referendum supplement*, 10 October 1976, 1.

⁷⁰ "In a way the polls succeeded," editorial, *The Varsitarian*, 31 January 1980, 8.

politics. Interestingly, the clamps on the mainstream and campus press had slowly loosened, allowing the “V” to dish out its usual critique of government policies and actions just like pre-1972. Sensing the change in media environment, the paper’s editors began striking the Martial Law back iron yet again. One of them was editor Benjamin Co⁷¹ who questioned in an opinion piece the possible lifting of Martial Law⁷² and its effect on the public, saying:

Doesn’t the charade seem ridiculous? Isn’t the farce being carried too far? We should remember that unless the present governmental structure is in itself intact and ready to stand on its own feet, the transition period is useless...

It seems that we are not yet ready to be free considering the number of irresponsible people still manning major posts in the governmental structure. We are not ready for the lifting of Martial Law especially if it is being lifted for reasons other than the legitimate one—that it should not be there in the first place.... The news of its lifting has rendered us numb that we haven’t even felt it is a momentous event that strikes at the core of our lives. If the government officials are more responsible and mature enough to face the lifting, they must grant us back all the rights the lifting is supposed to restore.⁷³

On January 17, 1981, Marcos issued Proclamation No. 2045⁷⁴ effectively lifting the state of Martial Law in the country to inaugurate the “New Republic.” But for the “V”, the lifting was “disgusting” and pretentious on many fronts because Marcos and his ilk were still in power:

For as long as the presidential decrees promulgated during the martial law regime continue to be in effect thereby still enforcing a one-man rule, and as long as the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus is still suspended even in only two regions in Mindanao, and with respect to persons who still languish inside prison cells, as well as others who will be detained for insurrection or rebellion, subversion, conspiracy, or proposal to commit such crimes and for all other crimes and offenses committed in furtherance or on the

⁷¹ Benjamin Co was a member of the editorial board from 1981 to 1982. Dr. Co is an infectious disease expert who regularly gives inputs on managing the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁷² One of the reasons for the lifting of Martial Law was the scheduled visit of Pope John Paul II to the Philippines from February 17 to 22, 1980. In his message to the President and to the Filipino people, the Pope emphasized the need to uphold human dignity and human rights to achieve peace and justice. See his full message https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1981/february/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19810217_manila-presidente.html

⁷³ Benjamin Co, “So what if Martial Law is lifted?” *The Varsitarian*, 20 November 1980, 2.

⁷⁴ Ferdinand Marcos. “Proclamation No. 2045, s. 1981. 17 January 1981. *Official Gazette*, accessed September 28, 2022, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1981/01/17/proclamation-no-2045-s-1981/>

occasion thereof, or incident thereto, or in connection therewith, it would be illogical to think that martial law is totally lifted.⁷⁵

Just three months after lifting Martial Law, Marcos then called for a plebiscite to ratify amendments to the constitution as part of the normalization process. As expected, the April 7, 1981 plebiscite got overwhelming public approval. These amendments vested the president more control of the legislature, giving him powers to nominate the prime minister and deploy his cabinet ministers as members of the Batasan executive committee.

Presidential elections on June 16 came next in the normalization agenda. Nonetheless, with the United Nationalists Democratic Organizations (UNIDO) refusing to field a candidate in protest of the farcical 1978 Batasan elections, the choice virtually boiled down to Marcos. Garnering more than 18 million votes, Marcos handily defeated World War II veteran Alejo Santos of the Nacionalista Party and was inaugurated as first president of the "New Republic" (Fourth Philippine Republic). In his inaugural speech, the president called on the Filipino people to close ranks for the sake of "national liberation."⁷⁶ But all these, for the "V," were in vain:

Today, the President calls for unity, for allegiance. But how can there be unity when there is no sense of national pride among distraught Filipinos? He promises revamps and reform of structure. But how can there be credibility in his words when he has tolerated such deplorable incidents, situations, structures, development in his regime for the past nine years? The Filipinos are wary. Will Marcos' New Republic boil down to the same frustrating "ningas cogon" New Society? Will the New Republic be the continuation of the New Society? Will it be another perfect excuse for gimmickry?

June 30 marked the birth of the New Republic. Still, many doubt if this era shall rid the Philippines of its shameful problems. It will still have to be tested. The fanfare, the glitter that greeted its birth may yet prove to be pre-mature. Time will serve to be its best test. As for now, it is not yet time to celebrate.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ "The meaning of Proclamation 2045," editorial, *The Varsitarian*, 27 January 1981, 4.

⁷⁶ Ferdinand Marcos, "Third Inaugural Address as President of the Philippines," 30 June 1981, accessed September 28, 2022, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1981/06/30/third-inaugural-address-of-president-marcos-june-30-1981/>

⁷⁷ "Is the New Republic like the New Society?" editorial, *The Varsitarian*, 20 July 1981, 16.

The “V” had clearly taken off its gloves and began knuckling the president who has overstayed his mandate. From here on, the “V” regained its full stature to continue its destiny – amid troubles, travails, and tensions – as watchdog of truth and accountability. For Campos, the “V” rendered them the lens of discernment to see beyond the fine print of constitutional authoritarianism that turned a legitimate cause to save the republic into a blinding pursuit for power. Campos and his “V” batchmates may have aged—their eyes worn out and vision blurred, but they are far from suffering the historical myopia that has effectively obscured from the pardoning public the excesses and atrocities of that bygone era:

Martial Law taught us how to lose our freedoms, because we had a dictator who controls all government institutions – the executive, the legislative the judiciary, while regularly issuing Presidential decrees. Martial Law simplified the corruption of the many, into the corruption of just one man – Marcos. Imagine the loot!

As student journalists, we learned to practice journalism in a period of repression. Survival was the key. We documented enough atrocities even just in our minds, and hoped for the best after graduation, and possible employment, if there was one.⁷⁸

Conclusion

The *Varsitarian* is no stranger to chronicling history. Since the pre-World War II years, the “V” had covered and commented on key events in the Philippines’ storied past. Among them are the years immediately preceding, during, and succeeding the Martial Law period. The “V” effectively contextualized UST life with the overarching narrative of military rule during the latter part of the Marcos regime by localizing the national and nationalizing the local through a balanced presentation of micro (Thomasian) and macro (Filipino) perspectives, respectively. The paper saw how *Varsitarian* staff members articulated their views by foregrounding UST events within the backdrop of Martial Law as well as the years immediately preceding and succeeding the period. For instance, the First Quarter Storm was portrayed from a Thomasian angle, infusing the experience of the student journalist and his fellow UST students who immersed in the moment, either as chronicler-observer or participant. The nine-year Martial Law period also saw how the “V” and UST coped with the constraints set by the Marcos regime, particularly anti-government sentiments expressed through campus journalism and school activities. School publications like the “V” were barred from writing incendiary

⁷⁸ Correspondence via email with Jones T. Campos, 28 September 2022.

articles against the government as part of a blanket policy to control all forms of media while student councils and other similar organizations were banned indefinitely.

Yet despite these restraints, the “V” proceeded with its mandate as chronicler of events and arbiter of opinion by tackling other pressing issues of local and national significance. Throughout its existence, critics have repeatedly scored the “V” for its supposed fickle-mindedness. The paper would praise someone today and disparage him tomorrow. It would defend an issue one day and attack it a few days later. Nevertheless, the “V”, despite its imperfections, had always practiced fairness and objectivity by looking at opposing sides and carefully fusing the contentions to build a factual stand on issues with deep historical implications such as the Martial Law period. To say that the “V” served as mouthpiece of anti-Marcos forces or the Cory Aquino administration after the Marcos regime, is a gross inaccuracy. It had called out not only Marcos, but also succeeding administrations like the Cory government’s incompetence during times of crises and calamities. The “V” likewise lambasted the Ramos, Estrada, and Arroyo administrations for corruption and other offenses.

The “V” as a media institution during the dark years of the Marcos regime simply fulfilled its role as a watchdog of historic events within and beyond the confines of UST. It criticized Marcos and his enemies not for the sake of criticism, but to wrest the truth and demand accountability for misdeeds suffered by the ordinary Filipino – Thomasian or not. It is to this day serving its purpose and following its destiny, armed with journalistic introspection and historical reflection. *

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