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#TalkThursday with Irwin Ver

29-37 minutes

Hello I'm Maria Ressa today we speak with retired Col. Irwin Ver, this is one of the first times he'll be speaking, 27 years ago he was chief of staff and the head of the Presidential Guards. He's also the son of General Fabian Ver, the head of the Armed Forces of the Philippines 27 years ago.

This Monday the Philippines marks the 27th anniversary of the 1986 EDSA People Power revolution peaceful uprising that ended 21 years of Marcos' rule.

RESSA: What's history to us Irwin is memory to you. What made you decide to speak now?

VER: There's been some events these couple of months, first would be the publication of the Enrile book, then yesterday there was this article from the former Foreign Minister [Bobby] Ongpin, that I felt were different from my recollection of the past, then of course there has been some talks, or people saying that it's time that we speak up, and because there's been many misconceptions of what my father was like.

RESSA: Your father has been called a butcher, a fearsome butcher, what was your father really like?

VER: That's precisely why I wanted to talk to you, he's far from that, he was a mild mannered guy, he was maybe too shy and too polite to a fault. He rarely talked and he always smiled. He's not an aggressive person. He was a very thoughtful father, never failed to be with us, on birthdays of his children, grandchildren, anniversaries, all that. He's definitely not a butcher, and I think if

you look at news accounts during those 21 years he was never involved in a murder plot, ambush or even any violent act at all whether it was an abuse of his authority or you can check the records, it was only during the Ninoy assassination that his name came into disrepute, he's being demonized now as a butcher.

RESSA: There's a lot to go through lets start with Juan Ponce Enrile, at that point he was the most powerful man in the administration. He's recently comeback, he's had a great comeback as Senate President, he wrote a very long book, in that book he portrays your father in specific ways, he basically said that he had a falling out with your father, that your father is the man behind the rumors that his son Jack Enrile murdered Alfie Anido. How of that is real, Juan Ponce's book.

VER: For one thing, this is a surprise when I read this, because I've always felt that my father respected Minister Enrile and in fact revered him. He always thought that Senator Enrile was going to be the next President of the Philippines— so he had that respect for him, that he was going to be my next boss. And regarding those events where you said Minister Enrile said he was out to kill him.

RESSA: That there wa fierce rivalry between your father and him...

VER: Right, and also that he was the one who distributed the rumours that Jackie...

Let me get to that one by one. During that time I was about to get married, Senator Enrile is really my Ninong and it's because my father insisted that he be my Ninong. I preferred then General Ramos who was my... the chief of the Constabulary and I was with the PC. But he really insisted that I should take ah... because he believes "Action Man" is going to be the next president.

RESSA: "Action man" is his nickname for Enrile.

VER: "Aksyon" will be the next president of the Philippines, I guarantee you that, he told me. In fact he showed me a letter from

Pres Marcos then, in the event of his death, its going to be committee then it was going to be headed by Minister Virata, then number 2 was immediately the Defense Minister. And he said, you can see how easily he can become the president. That's what he said because you know, Minister Enrile then was really the second most powerful man, next to the president, he was perceived as that. And we all actually revered him for his brilliance. So we went to his office and called on him so we could ask him to be my Ninong. And this was in 1981 and they had a good time together, for almost an hour in the office of the Secretary of National Defense there in Aguinaldo, they had a good time, they talked about the Martial Law times how it turned out very well at first but unfortunately it didn't... and so it did not look to me as I read the book that there was any rivalry going on.

RESSA: But that was 1981, could it have soured so much that your father was working against Enrile? By 1986, five years later.

VER: And this is where I would have to establish that my father... to fight against somebody more powerful than him? It's not in his nature. He's not one to keep his anger.

Or vent revenge or whatever and i don't see that, you don't fight the next president of the Philippines.

RESSA: According to your father what role did Enrile play in Martial Law?

VER: The way my father told me, he was actually the architect of Martial Law, chief designer everything, and because Minister Enrile, as brilliant as he is, but he is also the only one who knew Martial Law was going to be staged. He was the one who knew then that you had to prepare the correct environment for people to accept Martial Law. And my father said that was really the key, you cannot just suddenly impose ML overnight, that you cannot just suddenly put the checkpoints and everything, you have to prepare people. Those ambushades, whatever things happened then, from my understanding my father said these were all part of the preparations

for Martial Law. To accept, we need now, there has been, maybe, a breach of security, people's lives are in danger, we have to put the military in the streets.

RESSA: Did he stage the ambush that triggered ML?

VER: I don't know categorically whether he staged it, in fact my father said when he went to Malacanang, he said "Mr President I had been ambushed. It looks like it was the point where the president had to declare Martial Law.

RESSA: Is there anything that your father told you about the way Enrile handled, described Enrile as the architect of ML...

VER: My father has such a high regard to Minister Enrile, he always told me, he's brilliant, and he has this high respect for Minister Enrile.

RESSA: Were you surprised when you read Enrile's book where he said that your father was so against him that he created the rumours about Alfie Anido.

VER: It was all over the newspapers as soon as Alfie Anido died, it was not like, kept. So I don't think, General Ver, my father would have been prompt enough that it was... Alfie Anido... or rather that it was Jackie who was... I think it was already in the newspapers that there were rumors...

RESSA: before your father knew about it...

VER: and you know unlike the Minister of Nat'l Defense they keep newspaper men and all that... my father never engaged newspaper [men] in his office.

RESSA: If you go by the book, your dad and Enrile had a falling out. Did it ever happen?

VER: This is where we are surprised. I've always felt even up to the end when we left the very last day when we left for Hawaii that my father had always talked to Mr. Enrile. If there was a falling out, how is it that they are able to communicate.

RESSA: There's a famous video of your father, I watched this

when I came back in PTV4, when your father asked President Marcos to send in the troops. This is how history has painted him as the man willing to butcher his own people. What happened at that moment? Is this your father?

VER: Maria can I ask you a question, do you remember exactly what where the worlds of my father?

RESSA: No I don't. But I remembered seeing him it was a profile shot, he was almost bowing to former President Marcos and he was asking to let the troops loose.

VER: But it's not exactly in those words. I read it also in Wikipedia, its also the words... that he wanted to shoot protesters.

RESSA: It wasn't that, I know it wasn't that he wanted to shoot the protestors.

VER: I'm glad you remember.

RESSA: He just wanted a command to let the troops...

VER: I just read that today, something quoting Wikipedia. But of course we know Wikipedia, we can edit it anytime, I put things there too. Justifying that my father was exonerated by a court appointed by Cory Aquino.

RESSA: the Agrava Commission

VER: and as soon as I put it a week later it was removed, I don't know who does that.

RESSA: So back to that moment, you were there in the Palace.

VER: The events leading to that meeting with the Generals by the Commander in Chief was that the RAM attacked and in fact successfully occupied the National Media Production Center and there was firefighting there. I know because one of our soldiers from Class 71 and he reported, he was fighting back and before he realized... he was firing at his classmates who were also Class 71, Gringo being one. So he stopped firing back because he realised they were his classmates. Secondly and this is the one that triggered it, General Sotelo who was then the commanding general

of the helicopter wing flew helicopters and they fired at us at the Malacanang grounds and they fired at least a dozen rockets. One rocket hit a platoon of Marines and I was at the hospital I saw two of them one without a leg and the other one without an arm. I don't think they survived, we sent them to V. Luna. My presidential guards, I got hit on 2 posts, secured guard posts, and 1 officer who happened to be patrolling around— he got hit in his palm. My mother, because we have our quarters in Malacanang, when the bombing came, I telephoned and said "Better leave" because I knew they would come back again. And so I was about to leave and she was still grabbing her stuff, the driver had already started the engine of the car roaring, and the bombs came, it hit the car of my mother, there were maybe a dozen shrapnels in the car. My father then said "alright, we reached a situation where we are in a combat phase so he called upon the joint chief of staff, the operations, the training, all of that and they recommended "we have to counter attack, we cannot just sit down, we can't just let our troops suffer and accept the bullets. We have to fire back." My father asked for a meeting with the Commander-in-Chief. So that was the scenario. The President comes in, a little groggy because he was sick at the time and says "Don't fire, remove the bullets in your rifles, just point at them to show that we still have rifles..."

Those were the things [he was saying], and my father says, "No Mr. President" he felt the President could not grasp the situation. That's when my father stood up and he said "Mr. President it is the time that we have to counter-attack." That was what he said. That was what I can remember. And of course the President said no right away.

RESSA: At that point, that was February twenty...

VER: Oh can I add to that... I just want to clarify he did not say, let's fire at the protesters...

RESSA: Yes, you're right, it was a military [briefing]

VER: I should put a background to that again, in 1970, the student

activism was at it's height, they were able to ram the gate of Malacanang with a burning bus and they were able to open it. At that time the students started rushing into the gate. The head of the security, to protect the gate and the perimeter of Malacanang, was the Metrocom commander. He had a direct line with the President and my father was beside the President, and he asked "Permission to fire" and the President says "Yes, but you fire only water cannons not your firearms. Let those with the firearms be on the second line." My father remembered that. It became the mantra of PSC: that we should not fire at our own volition. We should always leave it to the highest authority if we fire. We always tell the PSC, we are a protective force, we are not an aggressive force. We are not a combat force. We only fire when we need to protect the president." My father knew that, when he said "Let's counter-attack," he's not going to fire at people. He can counter-attack by smashing forces, threaten or fire at specific targets, physical targets— it's not the people necessarily.

RESSA: Some people also believed that your father was behind the assassination of Ninoy Aquino. Two names are bandied about: Imelda Marcos, Fabian Ver. What do you know of your father's involvement in this.

VER: I'm glad you asked that because really this is where somehow the information gets lost. And it gets repeated that my father is the mastermind. We had the Agrava Commission. My father was exonerated from command responsibility. He being the chief of staff, and the soldiers there were involved, for failure to... I guess give them proper orders to protect Senator Aquino.

RESSA: But the first time the Agrava Commission did, it was still under Marcos' rule. Correct? So the feeling was that this was a cover-up.

VER: And at the time my father was very ecstatic that he was exonerated from that. And then 86 happened and we were exiled. Let me say I believed he was not involved at all.

RESSA: Why?

VER: Because of the events that followed immediately after the assassination. The thing happened in the airport. I was in the barracks nursing a feverish baby, 11 month old son. And my father barged in, he was in slippers. Get your troops in red alert something happened at the airport. I learned later on it was the assassination. If he were the mastermind, I think he would be in an operations room, with all the communications, monitoring every detail, maybe the flight arrival, are the troops in place. But he was there in slippers, in our quarters. I learned later on from my sister that he and my mother was supposed to go to LA because he was invited by one of his former classmates from the, I guess, Kentucky Police College, to be with him— he became the chief of police of LA... one of the cities in the LA county. And so then I realised it was also a surprise to him. The second thing I remember is, when a couple of hours later General Custodio, Luther Custodio, who is the commanding general of the Aviation Security Command, the one in charge of the security of the airport, who was a former officer of the Presidential Security Command. He was I think an intelligence officer, so my father asked him to report to him. And the office, I was there behind the door, I could hear that my father was asking “What happened, what happened?” And the words that struck me, why I knew my father did not know anything, if I may in Tagalog “naloko na, ginawa nyong martir si Ninoy. Nalintikan na tayong lahat.” And to me is a significant statement— that my father knows the effects of assassinating Ninoy Aquino.

RESSA: To your mind your father wasn't involved and found out about it after.

VER: Right. Now, he wanted so much... we were exiled, he wanted so much to clear his name.

RESSA: This is one of the big questions. Why has Ver never spoken?

VER: Right, and then president Cory Aquino commissioned a court

under justice Hermosisima. My father said, I'm going home and requested to return to the Philippines so that he could appear in court and defend himself in public. My father was of course, the first one in the charge list. But he was never allowed on the grounds that he was a threat to national security. So he was never allowed. The court proceedings went on without him defending himself. But to our surprise, to our very welcome surprise, he was acquitted with all the experts that they brought in from Australia, FBI, and all that... he was acquitted by the Aquino court. We feared that he was going to be convicted.

RESSA: And yet again your father didn't speak at all.

VER: He thought the truth had come out. He had this belief, okay, I don't have to say anything, that's it.

RESSA: Let me ask you about Bobby Ongpin, we talked about this earlier. So this year, for the 27th anniversary Bobby Ongpin gave an interview to the inquirer and he talked about Ver and I think it was Ver and Imelda as part of the triumvirate under Marcos. How did you react to Ongpin's article?

VER: Well, first, again, I'd like to think that my recollection is different from Bobby Ongpin. As a triumvirate, I would say my father does not have any political ambition, how can he be part of the the triumvirate. He was always just a supporting person. A very loyal person and we know he's only loyal to one man.

RESSA: To Ferdinand Marcos.

VER: And he will never, of course, be like a partner to the president.

RESSA: He would never allow himself to be a partner.

VER: He has no political ambitions. He doesn't. So I don't think... being part of the triumvirate would be a misnomer.

RESSA: During a time period, it was 86 to about 91, two books were written that actually described you father in a certain way. One was a book that Imelda Marcos hated. "The Steel Butterfly" by

Katherine Ellison and another by a New York Times journalist Stanley Karnow, "In Our Image". In these two books, including Ray Bonner's, your father was described as a man who follows orders, who was faithfully loyal to Ferdinand Marcos but not, and I'll paraphrase them, not smart enough to have done things on his own. How would you react to these.

VER: That's partly correct. My father will not initiate things without the clearance of his boss. Being smart enough, you can tell that to my father. But I know for a fact that he also entered UP, to the law school there. He was a Vanguard. He went after the war. The war interrupted that and then he went on to finish the law degree, not from UP because there were no night classes, he had to take it from FEU. He finished law. I don't know how smart he should be being a... but a military man, he is. He is the only person, until now, who started from the lowest rank, the back piping, went on to become sergeant-at-arms, until he became four-star general. So, you don't get that without some smarts.

RESSA: Take it in this context. Raymond Bonner wrote in "Waltzing with a Dictator" he was looking for the culprits. So who could've done this. I remember what he wrote about your father was something about his only, his fault would've been being loyal to an extreme.

VER: And therefore, he was, under order by somebody else. It seems like...

RESSA: Given like, the versions of history that are out there. That have now pushed you to come out and tell this fascinating story. Your point. Your version now. Your truth.

VER: Not my version, this is how... well, I don't know... the truth. I don't know who the mastermind is, if there was a mastermind. What I think might have happened is, while we like to think there is a mastermind, we like to think there's a big honcho there that orchestrated all of this. I'd like to think that there was only really from below and that they did it on their own because they wanted to

get rid of the thorn to Marcos. Those are loyal officers, they are acting, maybe colonels only, and there was no one big honcho who wanted to become president and wanted to eliminate Ninoy who was the threat to Marcos. And it's hard to accept that. It's right there, I mean, hey, Senator Aquino is the one assassinated. It's the same thing that the US, the American people cannot seem to accept at first, that only one person, Oswald, killed president Kennedy. What I'm trying to say is, it could happen that an assassination can take place from just one person, from maybe two or three persons but we doubt a big named person.

RESSA: Galman was there. They needed to get through security, someone rolled him out of the van. I guess this does smack of conspiracy, and I hate being a conspiracy theorist.

VER: There could be 4 or 5 people. But it doesn't necessarily mean there's someone higher than these people. Looks like there's colonels involved there. Maybe one general and maybe two more soldiers.

RESSA: What do you make of, some of the theories say Imelda Marcos was behind it because she wouldn't have calculated the impact.

VER: I don't think she has the men to carry it out. And of course, I will add to that. And of course they will say, General Ver. Because he was close, my father, like I said, will not carry out something like that. Something as terrible, something so significant without the president's orders. He will not. And like I said too, he knows too well that if you eliminate Senator Aquino, it will be the fall or it would be devastating to the Marcos administration. And let me add to that, now that I seem to recollect.

On 2 occasions I drove for my father when Senator Aquino was incarcerated or imprisoned in Bonifacio. 2 o'clock at night I drove for him and there were only 2 of us and he said, let's go to Bonifacio. I didn't know then that he was going to talk to Ninoy. It turned out, then I realized he was always the go between the

president and then I realized that there is a sort of relationship between the president and senator Aquino.

And it's one out of respect for each other. And what struck me now or then is my father said, you know, one time the president said, "Naku, itong si Ninoy, ang galing-galing ng ulo. Magpe-presidente to. Kaya lang malikot pa." That's what he said.

So I think, there again, I don't think the president would eliminate somebody he respects, who is brilliant enough to become president of the country.

RESSA: All of the accounts actually discount Marcos, stating something like that. How did you feel, how did you and your family feel after you went into EDSA, you didn't speak but you watched...

VER: Watched history unfold. Unfortunately we were at the wrong end of what has happened. I think we were resilient enough to go on with our lives. We had to look for jobs. I had my family, my wife and my 2 kids, 3 years old and 11 months. We just had to go to work. And I'm glad you asked that. And I'm glad you asked that. Contrary to what people might think that we live in luxury and we could just enjoy the riches that my father amassed. Well, unfortunately there's nothing so my brothers and I had to go to work. My younger brother, at one point, had three jobs. I've been fortunate that I could at least support my family with only one job. I'm still working.

RESSA: You are now...64.

VER: 64, and I'll be turning 65 actually this year, August. 66 is where I can enjoy full security benefits in the United States so that's my retirement day.

RESSA: How did you feel when you watched each one of your allies starting of course with Juan Ponce Enrile, and then Fidel Ramos, and then over time the people that you had trusted turned their backs.

VER: That's a good question, Maria. And people have asked me

that. It's not in our nature to keep that anger and be revengeful. We accept it. Okay, this is history, this is the cards we're dealt with. Let's go on with our lives. In the end, what is important is ethic. We were simple service men and I think we served our country well at the time that we were there. I think we can honestly say, we've been truthful to our sworn duty.

RESSA: You never wanted to comeback to reclaim your place in history, to come back into power.

VER: Like I said, it's not the Ver trait – to look for power. My father, Oh, now that you tell me about the triumvirate it came to my mind. My father, as you know during the Agrava commission. Before that, 2 years, he was going for 2 years of being Chief of staff, he said, this is enough, I'm going to retire. But the assassination came out so he didn't. As soon as the Agrava commission accelerated, he filed a retirement paper to the president. The president refused it. It was another 2 years before he retired. December of 1985, he again submitted his resignation and that time of course, my father was just tired of being vilified. And he said, All I want is to be, maybe, a security officer, and intelligence officer, he was head of NISA, "I'll just be there." I'll just be there but no longer in uniform. He was at the time 65 years old. So he filed his retirement. Unfortunately, not unfortunately, but 3 days after the president announced the snap elections. Again okay, after the elections. But EDSA came, and that retirement never happened.

RESSA: Irvin, when you were talking about serving during your time, you became emotional. Your eyes started to tear a little bit, why?

VER: Well, I felt, that's what I felt. We're no different from the people at EDSA, we thought as soldiers that we were protecting the sovereignty of the country. That was our sworn duty. We wanted to defend. We wanted to make sure that the president can continue serving and it feels hard to accept that suddenly we became the villains. We seem to be butchers and we cared no less about the

country. But we were there. And I think at that particular moment when I was talking, I remember, after we were hound by the helicopters. As I said, I was the commander of the guards, I had 36 posts around the presidential palace. I visited each of them. Each of the guards. The speech I gave to them was... because they were all worried, sir, when are we going to fireback? Are we going to be shot first before we can fireback? I said, no. We don't have the order to fireback yet. But you will wait for my command to do so, and I gave them a speech. Hey, we are prepared to defend the place for 6 months. We can be here for 6 months. At that moment when I was talking, and I remember these soldiers. I felt they were just waiting for me to say something that could relieve them of the tension of that. They all thought by standing ground there they were defending the county, laying their lives.

RESSA: What about Bobby Ongpin, what role did he play during the martial years and then after?

VER: At the time when we had a financial crisis and apparently because of the dollar exchange problem... that there were some Chinese traders who were controlling, instead of the central bank setting the dollar to peso rate, it was these Chinese and minister Ongpin proposed that we should control that, the Philippine government should control that. And he headed an operation to talk to these Chinese traders. I think 6 or 8 of them, I forgot the number. My father's role there was, Bobby Ongpin requested for security to make sure that, since there are transactions and it involved Chinese traders and so, NISA [National Intelligence and Security Authority], I believe, put up a task force Luntian and so they oversee that one. It's funny that in Bobby Ongpin's revelation that my father was out to kill him. But a year ago I believe he made this declaration in court exonerating the role of NISA, Task Force Luntian that they are really just supported the trading and in fact in that article he said, my father did not know anything about trading, which is probably true, and now he says he is out to kill him. But,

then he contradicts. What I feel was a contradiction is that at one point he felt not safe so he drove from his house on his own and went to Malacanang and talked to the president. Now, Malacanang is protected with concentric layers of perimeter security. You have the mobile security, transcon, and all that. Before, he could have crossed Jones bridge, his car would've been sighted, and if my father were out to kill him, he could've been stopped there. He was on his own. Then the second layer would be the Philippine marine checkpoints. They always report who is in there. My father would have known, they could've stopped them. Then into the gate. The third layer, and then before you even go up the stairs of Malacanang, you have to contend with the guard, and then you have the close-in security of the president. All of those are under my father. He could've been stopped. He was not. He was not.

RESSA: So you're saying it's not true.

VER: It's not true.

RESSA: There are 2 other points, this is the kidney transplant of former President Marcos. What did you know about that? This was right before Ninoy Aquino came back so this was in 1983.

VER: Maybe we can say that return of Ninoy Aquino was prompted by that transplant.

RESSA: Explain that for people who don't know.

VER: That perhaps he had knowledge of when the transplant occurred and that he probably would want to be here just in case president Marcos did not survive and of course there will be this struggle for a successor of Marcos and it would be better for somebody to be here rather than, it might be too late if he had to travel from abroad. There were American doctors. It could easily be monitored.

RESSA: Ninoy Aquino said this. I read this in one of the books.

There was a succession plan, was there a succession plan?

VER: There was a succession plan. And, my father showed that to

me when making the case that I should get minister Enrile as my ninong. He showed to me that it was minister Virata whom would be the head of a 7-man committee. Number one would be minister Virata, number two would be minister Enrile and then there were other ministers below. Chief of staff at the end there.

I'm trying to recall, I thought there was from the private sector.

RESSA: The Marcoses today. Imee Marcos is back, actually the Marcoses are back in power. What do you think of them, how do you remember them? What's your reaction to the fact that they are back.

VER: The Marcos name is pretty much blooming in Ilocos.

Governor Imee Marcos seems to be doing well. Sen. Bongbong Marcos, well he used to be governor then he rose. Of course, the Ilocandia nation have high hopes for him. It's not because they grabbed power, I mean they were elected. The story is they're still kuripot unlike their father that they would not distribute money instead they do house-to-house campaign and that's how they get their votes. And of course you don't have to give money to the Ilocanos, when you say I'm a Marcos.

RESSA: Some of the accounts of history now. Enrile's very long book, the Ongpin account. Ongpin talks about 5 conditions for Marcos to leave.

VER: I read parts of it, I'm not. I was not aware of that but one of them that struck me was for general Ver to be taken out. And this is true, I think. My father learned about this, and in fact, that's why I said before the American helicopters came, my father called up minister Enrile and asked, and apparently he was told that they would like to talk to him. And my father said, it should be in a neutral venue. And Hong Kong was the neutral venue. And I said, let's go, but we didn't because then, EDSA came. If there was animosity, my father still trusted minister Enrile enough for him to ask him then.

RESSA: Have you seen Enrile?

VER: No I have not, but he's still my Ninong. I'd like to think that whatever inconsistencies in his book, which you did, most of the media seems to have pointed out. I'd like to think it's more, should I say, mistaken memory or lapse in memory. My recollection is certainly different from what he had written.

RESSA: Any last words? This is a lot. This is the most you've said on this publicly. How do you want the Filipinos to move forward?

VER: I don't think I'm big enough a person to say that but if there is a last thing I would like to say is that, certainly, I hope, people will judge my father differently. He's been demonized. Get some sources. It seems like these things are repeated in the press over and over again. You pointed out that many of the writers today were not even born then so their source of information are what is written. If for example they could get sources like those who served the Marcoses, what they thought of my father. Cabinet ministers and all those, then they might have a better sense of who my father was.

RESSA: What do you think of the Philippines today? Another Aquino is in power, 27 years later.

VER: Well, there's been many presidents since EDSA, 4 or 5 presidents and... democracy is a slow process apparently. And for the Filipinos it seems like it's moving at a very slower pace. But apparently in this presidency, the one thing that seems to have ailed us is the corruption and if we can just remove that, I think it's a step in the right direction.