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## Interview: Senator John Melcher

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# Senator slams State Department, IMF 'meddling' in the Philippines

*Senator John Melcher (D-Mont.) is an outspoken critic of U.S. State Department policy toward the government of Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos, last year calling the Reagan administration's policy one of "benign neglect," at best. Senator Melcher has repeatedly blamed IMF economic constraints for fueling, not stemming the political destabilization of the Marcos government. Melcher has traveled widely in Southeast Asia. He was interviewed on Aug. 9.*

**EIR:** What are your views on current U.S. economic policy toward the Philippines?

**Melcher:** As you may know, I have placed several entries in the *Congressional Record* over the last month, on the State Department's attempt to block wheat sales to the Philippines. . . .

But let me zero in on three main points. These points are: First, our overall goal is to maintain our two bases at Subic Bay and Clark Field. The strategic importance of these bases cannot be exaggerated too much. Cam Ranh Bay, which we built up, is now available to the Russians, and their ships now patrol the area as with their air force. This capability would not exist for them except for Cam Ranh Bay. Simply reciting the facts on these bases makes clear their strategic importance.

Our lease arrangement for the bases has never been satisfactory to the Filipino people. While the Filipinos like us, the more aligned they are with us, the worse we treat them. These bases are our most important bases on foreign soil. But we pay at last two and a half times more the amount of rental for our bases in Greece, Turkey, and Spain, than we do for our bases in the Philippines. . . .

So our number-one goal is the retention of the friendship with the Philippines, which leads to the retention of our bases there, despite the low terms we pay for our lease.

The second goal must be to help the Filipinos stabilize their economy.

Our third goal is to enable Gen. [Fidel] Ramos to remain in control as Acting Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, and

be given all the authority and backing to deal with any abuse. This is extremely important in terms of the constabulary. The fear of the people, especially in the hinterlands, is that if they attempt to cut off all ties to the insurgency, they will be killed.

But what is State Department policy? To meddle around, to tinker around, whether it's selling wheat, dairy products, or rice—instead of exerting our effort on our major goals. . . .

**EIR:** State Department policy right now is that President Marcos should be removed. Do you agree with that?

**Melcher:** We have to wait on the Filipino people for that to see what they decide. There are election processes in the Philippines and if there is nothing done to call a quick, snap election, then Marcos's term will be up in 1987. If he is a candidate, he may or may not be elected. There's the question of his health. I would say that if the opposition parties unite, and have a strong candidate, then the opposition has a strong chance of winning. . . .

But we can't control that. It's up to the Filipinos to decide this. People vote in the Philippines, and at a very high percentage—80%. They are very political. . . .

**EIR:** You have been to the Philippines numbers of times and also recently. Is it true that Marcos, as he is referred to in the press here, is another dictator like Anastasio Somoza of Nicaragua, for example?

**Melcher:** No, nothing like it. What is decried here as evidence that Marcos is carrying out a poor policy, is recognized in the Philippines as good policy. For instance, the imposition in 1972 of martial law. That looks bad to us, but to the Filipinos it represented a turning point in the development of their country. Marcos broke up the small private armies and took away their guns. He stopped the use of weapons by people who had money, and said that henceforth defense is a function of the state. This was very much appreciated by the people of the Philippines. The second point is that Marcos used martial law to break up landholdings of landowners, and issue credit to the farmers through government agencies.

The rice farmers could buy the land and keep it. This was recognized as a major turning point. It's true that martial law probably outlived its usefulness. . . . But out in the hinterlands, the peasants, who live in barrio after barrio, believe that the Marcos regime is a good one. They will probably vote for Marcos as their choice. That's not true in Manila, where the feeling is decidedly anti-Marcos.

These are matters for the Filipinos to decide. Marcos is a very intelligent, astute leader whose roots are based in the democratic process. But any regime of 20 years in any country will begin to have problems holding on to power. The same Filipino who says he should go, that he has done some wrong things, will also say he did some good things, that he initiated things that had never been done before.

As for the State Department, they can do the positive things for the country much better than they are. The Filipinos want the bases to stay, but the bases can become a political football and then we're in trouble. Our policy should be one of open friendship, instead of trying to dictate.

**EIR:** According to our reports, the State Department is working with the group called "We Belong" of young military officers, in order to create a coup potential against Marcos.

**Melcher:** Well, we should stay out of that! It's like me trying to deal with my neighbors, and since I don't get what I want, I go to their children; well, I'm not going to get much from the parents after that! That's exactly what's wrong with our policy. Let them handle this. It's their own military. If we try to do that, we're crazy. We should deal with no lesser a level than Marcos himself, and Ramos and the immediate people around them. We have to deal with the opposition groups, have discussion with them. And we can deal with the Church. Cardinal Sin is approachable—knowledgeable of the situation in the Philippines. But to try to undermine the government with some other group, this is nonsense. It's damaging to our interests.

**EIR:** What do you think of the policy of the International Monetary Fund toward the Philippines?

**Melcher:** We have subverted our own interests, when we should have told the IMF they're crazy. The IMF has a passion for interfering in Central and South America. We should have taken the lead in stabilizing the Filipino economy, more than a year ago. We didn't have to wait for the IMF to come in. We were waiting, just holding our position, with no policy. . . .

The cronyism issue brings up a basic fear in the Philippines. The Filipinos don't like cronyism—the process whereby those who are in power award their friends to their own benefit. But the Filipinos also fear a new administration will bring in a new cronyism. . . .

Our interests lie totally in the well-being of the Filipino

people, and getting their economic recovery to move forward. This is true in regards to all our allies, but it is true in spades for the Filipinos.

We have to change the policy of the State Department. We must create reciprocal trade agreements with the Philippines, beginning with sugar. There is no other sugar-producing country where we have as much strategic interest as in the Philippines. This is the most important export for the Philippines and rather than giving the best deal in this commodity to the Dominican Republic—nothing against the Dominican Republic—we should be giving it to the Philippines. They need it now very desperately. The people of Negros are suffering in a very terrible way. There are other commodities in which we should arrange reciprocal agreements.

Food is absolutely essential. This must be the first step in dealing with the insurgency, because a hungry man is an angry man, and it is angry men who make up the insurgency. We don't want to make the Filipinos angry. We should be acting like a big brother to them—no, even that term is wrong. We should act like a concerned first cousin toward them, a friend.

I also personally advocate a renegotiation of the lease to pay the same amount of rent for those bases as we pay for bases in other countries. These are two positive steps in meeting our three major goals.

What happened on the wheat deal with the Philippines was that the State Department said the Philippines could purchase the wheat, but because the food minister is a close friend of Imelda Marcos's who might run for president but would be bad news, we wouldn't ship it. All that is, is slop out of the State Department's meandering thoughts. The Filipinos are a very polite people and naturally happy and witty people. Their politeness causes them often not to respond. They are very articulate and they can make an adequate response when they want. But they hate to tell their friends how callous and insulting they are to their friends. So that when the State Department did this, they said nothing, until finally, when the State Department refused to ship the wheat unless it went outside government agencies, the Filipinos finally spoke up, and the deal was pushed through.

**EIR:** What has been your personal interest in the Philippines?

**Melcher:** I think the Philippines is the gateway to what I see as a very important trade market for the United States. The Philippines could be a tremendous market for our high technology and for our agricultural commodities. The people are ready, and when the economy of the country is ready, this will be an extremely large market. But right now we should allow the Filipinos to decide these issues for themselves. The Philippines is going through some chaos now, no, I would say unsettled times now, not because of political pressures, but primarily because of economic pressures.