

**RECOLLECTIONS OF MY MEETINGS WITH LEADING WORLD FIGURES—  
BY SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA  
KING JUAN CARLOS I OF SPAIN**

On February 11 of this year [1998], the Manila Hotel in the Philippines was filled with a lively gathering of well-dressed people. A happy warmth, quite distinct from the steamy tropical weather outdoors, flowed through the crowd. A ceremony for the conferment of the Knight Grand Cross of Rizal on the king of Spain was under way. As a recipient of the same honor as well as the First Rizal International Peace Award from the Order of the Knights of Rizal of the Philippines, I had been invited to join the celebrations.

The Philippines was once a Spanish colony, taking its name from King Philip II of Spain. On the conferment of the decoration from the prestigious Philippine organization, King Juan Carlos said that he hoped to make it an opportunity to build a wonderful future of harmony between Spain and the Philippines. His words elicited resounding applause from the close to a thousand people in attendance.

When I presented the king with the certificate accompanying the award, he shook my hand and greeted me cordially. I had been introduced to the king in a reception room prior to the ceremony. He seemed to know who I was. In fact, several years ago, I was scheduled to travel to Spain and meet with him, but unfortunately ill health forced me to cancel my trip. I was sorry to have inconvenienced the monarch then, and I was very happy to have another chance to meet him in the Philippines.

King Juan Carlos I of Spain is a very tall man at 6 ft. 4 in. When I met the king in person, I was struck by his aura of personal strength and integrity.

I composed a poem for him entitled "Al gran Rey de la Paz, Sol de España" (Great King of Peace, Sun of Spain), praising his valiant and productive contributions to the restoration of democracy in Spain. The truth is that since his accession to the Spanish throne, his country has enjoyed prosperity as bright as the rising sun. The forty years of the dictatorial Franco regime had heavily oppressed the Spanish people and made Spain an outcast from Europe. When I visited Spain in 1961, the capital city of Madrid seemed bleak. There were few lights in the town at night, giving a dark, cheerless impression. Behind the façade of public order and safety, I sensed a feeling of desolation.

What a sharp contrast this was to my second visit to Madrid twenty-two years later in 1983, when it was bustling and bursting with activity! On that occasion, I met with then Spanish Minister of Culture Javier Solana. He was a young man of forty. In fact, the prime minister and other cabinet ministers were young as well. Mr. Solana told me how happy he was that Spain had been rejuvenated, been reborn. The country continued to demonstrate the fastest rate of economic growth in Europe and, in 1992, its new vigor attracted world recognition when Spain hosted the Barcelona Olympics and Expo 92 in Seville.

King Juan Carlos has been the linchpin of this amazing transformation. He realized that his country was at a crossroads: it must either transform itself into a democratic, humanitarian society, or suffocate under the weight of continued oppression. He stood up alone to proclaim that unless Spain moved forward with the times, it would have no future. He knew there was no other way, and he was determined to see to it that his nation did have a future. He did not allow himself to become flustered, he didn't rush things. He made steady progress toward that goal, taking one sure step at a time, carefully, yet never losing the moment. He would not accept failure.

He became king in 1975, but by that time, after long decades under Franco's dictator-

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Keywords: Carlos Daisaku Figures Ikeda Juan King Leaders Leading Meetings People Political  
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ship, all aspects of Spanish life and society had grown rigid and resistant to change. Any attempt to make the transformation to democracy would only stir a violent reaction from the old regime. There was also considerable danger of civil strife. He wanted to avoid that at all costs; the wounds of the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), which set father against son, brother against brother, were still not fully healed. The young, thirty-seven-year-old king's struggle for democracy was like a delicate operation—one slip of his hand and the patient, Spain, might die.

King Juan Carlos was born in Rome (in 1938), where the Spanish royal family lived in exile at the height of the Spanish Civil War.

When he was only ten years old, he was sent back, all alone, to Spain to live under Franco's rule. In many ways, he was little more than a hostage. In November 1948, an express train from Portugal made an unscheduled stop at a small country town several kilometers outside Madrid. This was arranged to avoid a warm reception by royalist supporters for the young prince when he arrived in Spain.

Stepping out onto the platform, the prince was greeted instead by a blast of piercing cold wind blowing down from the mountains in the north. The icy cold of that day is probably etched forever in his heart, for it was a day that marked the end of his childhood innocence—an end that came far too soon and far too cruelly. He was forced, at the young age of ten, to acquire two strategic weapons to survive: silence and caution.

Spain was still officially a monarchy, but the real king was Franco. There was a fierce split between right and left in the country, and anything the prince might say would be used by one camp or the other for political purposes. On the other hand, his complete silence would also send a message. He was living under a microscope, his every word and deed scrutinized.

But he had one reason to be happy: he was fortunate in having a wonderful teacher, Torcuato Fernández Miranda. To this day, the king still looks up to him with everlasting gratitude.

Mr. Miranda was a very extraordinary teacher. He never brought notes or written materials with him to his classes with the prince. One day when his young student asked him about textbooks, Mr. Miranda responded, "Your Highness doesn't need them."

"Why don't I need them?" exclaimed the prince in astonishment.

"You just don't, Your Highness," replied his teacher, "You must learn through listening and looking at everything around you."

Mr. Miranda also often said to him: "Sometimes situations seem the same, but below the surface they are very different. History repeats itself, but not identically. The impetus is different each time."<sup>1</sup>

The teacher made heavy demands on his student, because he knew he was educating a future king.

On another occasion, the prince asked Mr. Miranda: "But how will I get the hang of everything? Who is going to help me?"

His teacher replied: "There is no one to help you, Your Highness. Being the king will be like a flying trapeze act with no safety net below."

"No net?" asked the prince.

"None," came the reply.<sup>2</sup>

The young prince needed to cultivate intelligence and astuteness of judgment, but if he revealed these qualities, he could put his very life in danger.

He was living in a miasma of uncertainty, never knowing, when he opened the door,

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whether to expect a crown on a velvet pillow or a warrant for his arrest from the Civil Guard. He learned the arts of patience and perfect self-control. Only when people insulted his father, still in exile, did he react violently. He would not permit it; he even got into fist fights with fellow students about it. The government-controlled mass media launched a smear campaign against his exiled father, trying to implant a negative image of him among the Spanish people. This strategy to discredit his father and the royal family, aimed at undermining the royalist forces in Spain, continued for decades.

No doubt largely as a result of this, when Franco died in November 1975, there was no public support for the reestablishment of the monarchy. Nor were there any hopes for the arrival of a new age. Forty years of dictatorship had left heavy shackles on the hearts of the Spanish people, and they didn't expect any changes. But they were wrong. The newly crowned King Juan Carlos had been waiting for just this opportunity, and the establishment of democracy in Spain began to take place right before their eyes. Most surprising, perhaps, was the change that came over the young royal himself. The once taciturn, undistinguished, shy crown prince was suddenly transformed into a resolute, affectionate, outgoing king, adapting to the new situation superbly.

With an extraordinary skill for preventing confrontations between opposing forces, King Juan Carlos pressed forward with his quiet revolution. He stepped lightly, as if walking on thin ice, paying careful attention to the concerns of the old regime while assembling a team of talented young people with a contemporary sense and bringing fresh air into the discourse on Spain's future. And so it was that three years after Franco's death, "fascist Spain" became a democracy with a constitutional monarchy resembling that of the United Kingdom. The world was astonished at this unbelievable accomplishment.

Then, on February 23, 1981, there was a counterreaction. In an attempted coup d'état, a faction of the military occupied the in-session parliament, taking all of its members hostage and refusing to leave. The world held its breath. Would the democratic reforms, so long awaited, all be undone? King Juan Carlos quickly phoned the country's top military leaders one after another and gained their assurances that they would support him no matter what position he decided to take in the crisis. The king was undoubtedly driven to protect democracy even if it cost him his own life. Despite the high tension of the unfolding events, he didn't lose a moment and sprang swiftly to action.

King Juan Carlos went in front of the television camera and announced firm measures against the coup to his forty million countrymen and countrywomen, rallying their energies and support. He denounced the coup as an act of terrorism against the entire nation, and declared that such lawlessness would not be permitted. Hearing this absolutely clear proclamation of the king's intent to protect democracy, the people were able to sleep in peace, and the insurgents had no choice but to call off the coup.

The king was putting his beliefs into practice; his role, he believes, is to learn what the people are thinking quietly to themselves and then say it in a loud, public voice. In this case, he put that belief into practice by throwing himself before the forces who threatened democracy and making himself their target. His grandfather King Alfonso XIII had behaved in a similar way a half-century earlier, when he was being driven out of the country. His military supporters proposed attacking and destroying his opponents, but the king said that not a single drop of Spanish blood should be shed because of him.

Serving all the people of Spain, even at the sacrifice of one's life—that is the duty of the country's monarch. Clearly, King Juan Carlos feels that noble purpose and sense of responsibility with a strength matched by his powerful and dignified bearing.

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"The captain goes down with the ship," as the saying goes. The captain remains to the last, making sure that every crew member and passenger is safe before thinking of his or her own fate. Unfortunately, Japan's present crop of leaders, in both government and business, seem to subscribe to the opposite view. Instead of seeing to the well-being of the people, their concern is "leaders first." This reversal suggests that the people exist for the sake of leaders and not the other way around. Unfortunately, this seems to be standard operating procedure in Japan today.

I had an opportunity to greet Queen Sofia of Spain as well, before the ceremony in Manila. I found her elegance, warmth and kindness most impressive. She has worked hard to improve the lot of Spain's poor. I have heard that, whenever there is a natural or other disaster, she immediately flies to the scene in a helicopter and comforts the victims' families. Even normally cynical journalists have been moved by witnessing the speed and sincere concern with which the queen responds to the troubles of the people.

Two days after the ceremony at the Manila Hotel, I was heading for the Ninoy Aquino International Airport to depart for Hong Kong. When I entered the waiting room, I was surprised to learn that King Juan Carlos was also at the airport, on his way back to Spain. His schedule had been changed for some reason, and we found ourselves, quite by coincidence, at the same airport at the same time. Philippine Foreign Minister Domingo Siazon invited me into the area where the king was, so that I could pay my respects.

King Juan Carlos was standing, talking pleasantly with a group around him. He was dressed in a very relaxed fashion, wearing a striped blue shirt and a necktie. When he saw me approach, he apologized for his casual appearance. I was impressed by his humility and sincerity. "Please, don't worry about it," I said, adding, "The Philippine people were so happy to welcome you, Your Majesty, a man of great character and honesty, to their country."

When I told him that, the king replied in Japanese, "Domo arigato" (thank you), accompanied by a warm smile. No doubt his power to charm everyone he meets is one of the fruits of the hard times he endured as a young man. Even republicans and communists who oppose the monarchy on principle are unsparing in their praise and affection for the king. His character has transcended all political parties and unified the nation.

The terrible suffering humanity has experienced this century has also been reflected in the history of Spain. Beginning with the Spanish Civil War, which was a precursor of World War II, Spain has seen revolutions, civil strife, fascist dictatorship, and the struggle for democracy. Finally, it had won, with a bloodless revolution and a new unity.

Fifty years have passed since the young prince stepped down onto that cold and windy train platform. It has been a long, long journey.

King Juan Carlos is the recipient of UNESCO's Félix Houphouët-Boigny Peace Prize for contributions to democracy and peace, and he has been mentioned as a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize, but without a doubt the peaceful smiles of the Spanish people are the greatest glory and honor for this Great King of Democracy. □

1. Translated from Spanish. José Luis de Vilallonga, *El Rey: Conversaciones con D. Juan Carlos I de España*, trans. from French by Manuel de Lope (Barcelona: Plaza and Janes Editores, S.A., 1993), p. 96.
2. Ibid.