

Eulogy for S. R. Nathan

by Tommy Koh

Salutations

1. Mrs Nathan and members of the Nathan family, Mr President, Prime Minister, the Speaker of Parliament, the Chief Justice, Fellow Singaporeans, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

MFA and Foreign Service

2. I have the honour to speak on behalf of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Singapore Foreign Service. Mr Nathan had played a key role in the founding of both institutions. He joined the Ministry in December 1965 and helped our first Foreign Minister, Mr Rajaratnam, to set up the Ministry. He left in 1971 to assume another assignment. He returned in 1978 as its First Permanent Secretary. The Prime Minister had given him a mandate: transform the Ministry into a first class one in two years or it will be closed down and made into a department of the Prime Minister's Office. It seemed like a mission impossible. I had known Mr Nathan and worked closely with him since 1968. I regard him as my mentor and my comrade. In my eulogy I will focus on the three enduring contributions which Mr Nathan had made.

From No Class to First Class

3. First, Mr. Nathan succeeded in transforming the foreign Ministry, in two short years, from no class to a first class one. As we all know, Mr Lee Kuan Yew had very high standards. He made no allowances for the fact that our Ministry was new and we were all learning on the job. He expected the quality of our output to match the high standard of the centuries-old British Foreign Office. Undaunted by the challenge, Mr Nathan recruited bright young officers to join him. He demanded discipline, hard work, and competence. Most of all, he demanded loyalty and dedication to duty. His method of leadership was “tough love”. However, behind that tough façade, there was a warm and kind heart. A few months ago, he hosted a lunch for about a dozen of the bright young officers, now grown old, who had helped him to fulfil his impossible mission. He wanted to thank them and to explain why he was such a demanding boss. It was a poignant occasion because we knew that it would be the last reunion with “The Boss”. Because of the strong foundation he had laid, the Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Singapore Foreign Service are considered among the best in the world.

Courage In The Face of Adversity

4. Second, he taught us to be courageous and to defend Singapore’s interests without fear or hesitation. Mr Nathan was a courageous man as can be seen from his heroic role in the Laju case. He was our Ambassador in Washington at a difficult time. The Michael Fay case erupted during his

watch. My American friends have told me that they admired the calm and rational way in which he defended Singapore's position in the face of vicious attacks. He held high the flag of Singapore. Because of his example and precept, although Singapore is a small country, it is a country which cannot be bullied by bigger countries, not even the major powers. One of the principles of Singapore's foreign policy is that it will stand up for its national interests against any foe, big or small.

Singapore's Super Ambassador

5. Third, Mr. Nathan represented Singapore with great distinction as our High Commissioner to Malaysia and as our Ambassador to the United States. However, his most important diplomatic role was as the sixth President of Singapore. During his 12 year tenure, he visited more countries than all his predecessors put together. Through these state visits, he strengthened our links with other countries, expanded our political and economic space and opened the door to new economic opportunities for our business and industry. He had a flair for dealing with foreign leaders and foreign countries. Perhaps because of his training in social work, he was able to establish a good rapport with his interlocutors and to put them at ease. He had the memory of an elephant and could remember people he had befriended in his previous assignments, no matter how long ago. He was able to convert his global network of friends into friends of Singapore.

Conclusion

6. I shall conclude. Mr. Nathan will always be remembered as one of the founders of our Foreign Ministry and Foreign Service. Our success today is due to the strong foundation that he, Mr S Rajaratnam, Mr Lee Kuan Yew and other pioneers had laid. He taught us to be courageous and to be fearless in defending the national interests of Singapore. He was our super Ambassador to the world.

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