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Remembering SR Nathan

Man of Guts, Instinct & Tenacity

By Ong Keng Yong

Synopsis

Mr S.R. Nathan is a legend from Singapore's pioneering generation who will always be treasured. He was tough as a boss, yet caring and nurturing at the same time. At the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which he helped build as an institution, he left behind an indelible imprint on those who served under him.

Commentary: First Encounter with S R Nathan

I FIRST MET Mr S R Nathan soon after I joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in June 1979. His reputation was awesome. He came to MFA as First Permanent Secretary a few months before I entered the Foreign Service. When I moved around the Ministry corridors at City Hall then, the talk was all on how Mr Nathan shook up MFA. He introduced a full-time MFA duty office and the morning "prayers" – the daily meetings of heads or deputy heads where they would brief him on issues of significance. He invented the "Info Notes" and these were produced a few times weekly to keep the Cabinet members and other top officials informed of what was happening in foreign affairs and their implications for Singapore. The policy briefs were jazzed up and maps were included as annexes. He rejected "palavers" – long-winded narratives or woolly recommendations - in MFA submissions. Many MFA staff members on posting abroad were scheming hard to extend their overseas assignments by hook or by crook!

S R Nathan's "Praetorian Guard"

My seniors in MFA, however, told me that Mr Nathan would shower "love" on the "1979 batch"! It was the first time MFA could recruit 11 officers in one calendar year.

Therefore, they thought that Mr Nathan would develop this “bumper crop” into his best “Praetorian Guard” for the Ministry. Sure enough, Mr Nathan paid a lot of personal attention to us from the 1979 batch.

Mr Nathan soon instituted an area specialisation Master’s studies programme for the 1979 batch: we would be sent out in groups of two or three over time to be trained as Arabic, Indonesian, Thai, Vietnamese and other ethnic speakers with a strong grounding in history, politics and society of the countries concerned.

I went to Georgetown University in Washington DC for two years. Mr Nathan disagreed with then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew when he sent me to Washington DC for Arab studies. Mr Lee believed that Cairo was the place that MFA officers should go to learn about the Arabs and their language. Mr Nathan, on the other hand, supported the view that Georgetown University and the US capital city would be a better venue for MFA to train its professionals in the nitty gritty of the Arab world and to understand the big-power politics inflicting harm and impinging on the future of the Middle East countries.

The Coin and Other Lessons

Before I went to do my Master’s degree, I learnt several things from Mr Nathan. Two points were ingrained in me. First, no job is too big or too small. Second, there are two sides for everything. He believed that all MFA officers must be able to do the strategic thinking and writing as well as the administrative and operational chores. An Ambassador of Singapore must go through all levels of diplomatic work and be able to manage a team of Foreign Service Officers in any of our embassies abroad.

Occasionally, Mr Nathan would act like he was the Chief of Protocol and double-checked all the physical arrangements for the visits of our political leaders overseas and incoming visits by foreign dignitaries. He institutionalised many standard operating procedures (SOPs) to ensure that all preparations and contingencies are within anticipation and control.

Mr Nathan would show me a coin on a few occasions. He said “there are always two sides of the coin”. He would stress that as civil servants, we must never outshine the Political Office Holders in the open. At the same time, we must not take all things they say as a royal decree. The important thing is to talk about the different angles of any issue and come to a sensible decision. There must be awareness of the extreme positions one can get from trying to tackle any issue.

For Mr Nathan, the Political Office Holders must be engaged in a polite and strategic manner as they were elected to public office and responsible to the people while civil servants chose to be the professionals in public service. He advised me that the differences must not be mixed up. "Civil servants are not the political leadership and we have different tasks and responsibilities", he would often point out to me. Mr Nathan left me with this profound technique: whisper the right note at the right time to the right person to get the desired results.

Time for Simpler Things

I served as Number 2 to Mr Nathan in our embassies in Kuala Lumpur and Washington DC. His diplomatic skills and energy level left me panting for breath very often. Still, he had time for simpler things. For example, we were required to sing after office hours with High Commissioner Nathan and Mrs Nathan in the embassy multi-purpose hall as a group every week for two months.

The reason was that he discovered MFA staff in KL did not sing Majulah Singapura well enough. The boss paid for a professional music teacher to polish up our rendition of the national anthem. Along the way, we were taught to sing beautifully Frank Sinatra's "My Way" and another song about tying a yellow ribbon around the old oak tree. These lessons enabled me to have at least three songs for the karaoke gathering at the end of various official meetings in ASEAN circles.

The humble man in Mr Nathan always champion the chap from the "normal stream". He would give one chance, then another chance and even a third chance for his subordinates to measure up. He saw good in almost every person he worked with. Even those he criticised and scolded occasionally, he would forgive and shower care and love. I feel that Mr Nathan believed that the most useful asset of a person is not a head full of knowledge but a heart full of love with ears open to listen and hands willing to help.

Man of Guts, Instinct and Tenacity

Mr Nathan told me to visit smaller colleges and less prominent universities in America where Singaporeans were schooling. That brought me to places like Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska and Oklahoma. His main concern was to demonstrate our embassy's care of Singaporeans beyond the Ivy League and blue-chip institutions of tertiary learning. Through this kind of networking, Mr Nathan helped our embassy in Washington DC reach out to many people in far flung places. Many Singaporeans saw him as an Ambassador who was earthy, practical and one who had time for the ordinary man. Mr Nathan made a difference in many people's lives. He captured the imagination of Singaporeans young and old.

I would like to read you what our former Chief of Protocol Chin Hock Seng said of Mr Nathan:

"Mr Nathan was a man who made his mark on our country, its institutions and its officers. He left both a professional and personal imprint on me, as on many others. A wider understanding of my work, my attitude and outlook springing from that, my desire to do justice to the job, and will to overcome obstacles to get it done – so much of it all was transmitted to me over time by exposure to Mr Nathan's character and values. The two and a half decades of my public service career and my work life today, is marked by habits formed and shaped while serving Mr Nathan in different capacities".

I fully agree with Chin Hock Seng. Mr Nathan has left a deep imprint on my own career and my life.

I can go on much more on what Mr Nathan had done for MFA and Singapore. The

fact is this is a humble ordinary man who became a super achiever with his guts, instincts and tenacity. He was so natural. But he continuously drew on each episode of his fascinating life to be a better person and an extraordinary leader of our community. For me, Mr Nathan is the grand “Jedi” of the special class of Singapore warriors, protecting our society from the dark side, to borrow an analogy from the Hollywood blockbuster movie series “Star Wars”.

I was fortunate to be at the bedside of Mr Nathan at the hospital before sunset on the day of his passing. He was unconscious and breathing heavily even though his blood pressure had stabilised. After a few moments with him, I leaned forward and said: “Have a good rest, Sir.”

This tough yet kind man had worked relentlessly his whole life for a country he helped to build. I salute him. He is a legend for our nation and will always be treasured.

Ambassador Ong Keng Yong is Executive Deputy Chairman of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Prior to this, he served in various diplomatic and leadership positions, including as ASEAN Secretary-General. This is part of a series in tribute to the late SR Nathan, Singapore’s Sixth President and founding Director of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, later known as the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

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