Get off my island, please

Column by Matthew H. Hersch

It's a good thing people act irrationally. If they didn't, life would be much more expensive. For as long as anyone can remember, the Clark and Subic Bay US military bases have sat in the Philippines, poised to attack or defend against the Soviet naval machine in the Pacific. Under the age-old rental deal, the United States received the rights to operate these bases, one of which is its largest in the Pacific, in return for payment. The United States got big bases in the heart of the Soviet’s main shipping lanes and sub ports, and the Philippines got cash, protection, and an economic boost from American tourists. The United States was happy. Ferdinand Marcos, the Philippines’ US-sold quasi-dictator, was happy, and his wife Imelda bought lots of shoes. But that's all old news.

When Marcos lost power to opposition leader and US-backed Corazon Aquino in a peaceful coup five years ago, it was a sign that the US-Philippine relationship was about to change. Not that Aquino didn't like the United States — quite the opposite.

None of this is really very surprising. People hate it when other people’s bases are on their land — it makes them feel violated. Wherever referenda have been taken in other places on similar issues, the bases usually get the boot.

Aquino, and the democratic forces she represents, enjoy the security and economic advantages of having the world’s only superpower in their backyard. The Philippines is still a very poor country, littered with behind-the-times Maoist jungle Marxists and a military with an independent streak. During one coup attempt against Aquino by rebel military units, local US fighter jets zoomed up and down a Philippine Air Force Base, making annoying sonic booms that kept Philippine planes from taking off and bombing Aquino. Aquino will be sad to see the Americans, and the stability they fostered, go.

Fortunately for the United States, we will win either way. The Philippines stand against US bases may be irrational, but may save the United States millions in base maintenance and rental costs. The necessity of maintaining Subic has always been questionable, because bases in Thailand and Japan can do the job. Getting kicked out of the Philippines would be a great defense budget cut — defense spending would be reduced, the Philippines would be independent, and the domestic defense industry would not be threatened.

The United States can’t lose, really, unless Aquino's support for the base renewal allevates the voters and pushes them left. That, more than anything else, is the United States’ real problem.