Of all the slogans associated with Dr. Mahathir’s rule, the most resonant was not created by, or for, him. As far as anyone knows, *Malaysia boleh* was the tagline used in a marketing campaign for a health beverage in the 1980s. It translates as “Malaysia can”, or more grammatically, “Malaysia can do it”, and with Dr. Mahathir at the helm it became the battle cry of the nation. It echoed from the stadium as Malaysian sportsmen upheld national honour on the field, and it rang out in response to any news that could be construed as a Malaysian triumph.

The sentiment embodied in *Malaysia boleh* fit Dr. Mahathir’s can-do personality perfectly. He wanted his fellow Malaysians, especially the Malays, to be proud, capable and confident. While Dr. Mahathir pursued initiatives meant to eliminate vestiges of colonial thinking at home and show that Malaysia was taken seriously abroad, he built for the ages on a scale that impressed Malaysians and foreigners alike. The north-south highway stretched from the tip of southern Thailand to the outskirts of northern Singapore. Connecting Penang island to the mainland was the longest bridge in Asia. An international airport for the capital matched the region’s biggest and best. A proposed dam in Sarawak state would flood an area roughly the size of Singapore. Kuala Lumpur, once a nondescript urban tangle, took shape as a modern metropolis distinguished by eye-catching architecture that included iconic twin towers, the world’s tallest. *Malaysia boleh!*

Driven by a nationalistic vision and paying due regard to aesthetics, Dr. Mahathir’s building frenzy created a buzz among Malaysians. The doctor-politician diagnosed that they were suffering from a dire case of inferiority complex, and they responded with puffed chests to the treatment he prescribed and administered. As Dr. Mahathir explained, his monumental projects were “good for the ego” of a developing country. “To be noticed when you are small, sometimes you have to stand on a box,” he said. Ignoring critics, Dr. Mahathir kept on building in ever more spectacular style: a Formula One racing circuit, a government-guided version of California’s...
Silicon Valley and a brand new administrative capital for the future Malaysia.

After the Malaysian government made it into Guinness World Records with the world’s highest flagpole, individual Malaysians went scrambling up Mount Everest, crossed the Antarctic and sailed the oceans in search of more records. If they did not qualify for the real thing, they found recognition in the Malaysia Book of Records, a home-grown version that let them create their own categories of accomplishments.

Dr. Mahathir championed the record making and breaking, sometimes appearing at events to participate, or commend the performers, reinforcing the belief that they were doing their bit to turn Malaysia into a mighty country. He embraced corporate executives who delivered, such as Ting Pek Khiing, a brash entrepreneur from Sarawak who made his fortune in construction and timber. Ting left an enduring impression on Dr. Mahathir by hurriedly building resort facilities on the island of Langkawi in time for Malaysia’s first international air show in 1991. Dr. Mahathir later boasted that “we” designed, built and equipped a 170-room, five-star hotel on Langkawi in four months, while deciding half way through to make up for a projected shortfall in accommodation by adding a 300-room, three-star hotel; it was finished in 53 days. Both were records and deserved a place in Guinness, he declared.

At its best, the Malaysia boleh fervour engendered patriotism and encouraged Malays, Chinese, Indians and other minorities to forget their ethnic differences and take pride in being Malaysian. While it remained a noble cause for some, however, it degenerated into farce for others. As political opponents attacked Dr. Mahathir’s “mega-projects” for their extravagance, his Malaysia set the unofficial world record for setting records, many of them banal, bizarre or plain wacky. They included the largest gathering of old people at a circus, the most number of heads shampooed in one day at a shopping mall and the highest backward climb up a staircase.

In conjunction with a World Youth Games in Moscow organized by the International Olympic Committee in 1998, Malaysia dispatched a 16-member team to participate in a mass jump on the North Pole. The think-big wrinkle: With the help of the Russian military, the Malaysians floated a Proton Wira down to the icy waste, prompting some of their countrymen to “mock the inanity” of seeking to have their national car become the first Asian auto to arrive in the Arctic by parachute.

Five Malaysian skydivers took aim at the South Pole in a trumpeted “Millennium Jump” at the turn of the century, only to miss their target by a thousand kilometres or so. They landed at Patriot Hills in the Chilean-claimed western Antarctic, disappointing Malaysia’s youth and sports ministry, which had advanced the organizers RM780,000 to help make the polar bid. Stoicly, Ong Tee Kiat, a deputy minister, pointed out that a jump