

Written by Bobby Reyes

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A good number of Filipino congressmen, officials and dignitaries and their respective entourages will be flying to Las Vegas for the nth time to see, nay, witness ring-side the coming bout between Filipino boxing great Manny Pacquiao and boxing legend Oscar de la Hoya on Dec. 6, 2008, as they did on June 28, 2008, in his fight against David Diaz. Why do some Filipino-American pundits, wags and detractors criticize unfairly these Filipino officials and legislators in attending Mr. Pacquiao's championship fights?

In the first place, these Filipino officials and lawmakers are spending their personal hard-earned money to witness Mr. Pacquiao's fights. They just don't go to Las Vegas on a mere trip (or junket) to see the boxing bout. They go to Southern Nevada on a mission – as in a trade or investment-promotion mission.

Going to Las Vegas to be at the ring side is a good demonstration of Filipino patriotism. Why, all the Filipino-flag waving and cheering amount to boosting the morale of a poverty-stricken people. Yes, impoverished Filipinos can afford only one meal a day but they save many, oops, money to see Manny Pacquiao fight on Pay-TV in Manila and many cities in the Philippines. Mr. Pacquiao's fight is a matter of national pride, aside from boosting the foreign reserve of the country (as Mr. Pacquiao brings home not only the bacon but also the dollars in several million versions).

Many Filipino government officials actually promote not only Philippine-made rum during their trips to Las Vegas and other American cities but also other Filipino products – without collecting per diems or extra compensation from the public treasury.

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And the publicists of these Filipino congressmen and public officials privately say that they actually earn hard currency for the Philippines, as they bet on Mr. Pacquiao's assured victory at the legalized gambling spots in Las Vegas. Filipino casinos do not yet accept bets on boxing fights, don't they? In short, their first mission is to take advantage of good opportunities to make money for their constituents, not necessarily at the expense of the Filipino people. Because when these Filipino dignitaries go home, they distribute their winnings to Philippine charities and their constituents.

Yes, to these Filipino legislators and officials, the Filipino boxer's first name might as well be spelled, "Money." As in good hard-earned money for the people, charitable causes and concerns.

Besides, Mr. Pacquiao's fights make the starving Filipino masses forget their hunger and pains – even for a single night of the year. Yes, a victory over David Diaz may turn the entire Filipino homeland into a local version of Diazneyland, ops, Disneyland. Who would object to turning the Philippines into one of the happiest places on earth – even just on the night (or day in Manila) of Manny Pacquiao's victory over Mr. Diaz?

Filipino congressmen and dignitaries play a lot in protecting the interests of Mr. Pacquiao and the Filipino boxing world. For instance, many of them serve as interpreters, as Mr. Pacquiao cannot not speak English as good as former President Erap Estrada or movie actress Melanie Marquez. Without the Filipino legislators around, how could the world understand what Mr. Pacquiao is talking about – especially since the Filipino boxer is always promoting Filipino tourist spots during the mainstream media's interviews with him?

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This writer objects strongly also to a Filipino-American joke that claims – without rhyme or reason – that these Filipino politicians and public officials go to Las Vegas because they always hold a reunion with Mr. Pacquiao's trainer, the celebrated Freddie Roach. This writer does not find it funny for budding Filipino-American comedians labeling Filipino congressmen and other visiting dignitaries as relatives of Mr. Freddie for they are allegedly “utak ipis.” To those who do not get the ugly (and corny) joke, “utak” is brain in the Filipino language and “ipis” is the Filipino term for a roach. Mr. Freddie is certainly one of the most-dignified and intelligent trainers in the history of American boxing and his family name should not be taken in jest – even if detractors assume unfairly and unkindly for the sake of argument that some Filipino congressmen have the brains of a roach.

There are many Filipino congressmen who have brilliant minds. I can attest to the fact that the Honorable Prospero Nograles, the speaker of the House of Representatives, is brilliant, he being this writer's classmate at the Ateneo de Manila College of Law. Although this author and Mr. Nograles belonged then to separate fraternities, it is a fact that the Ateneo admits (ahem) only above-average and nationalistic students.

Even another acquaintance of mine at the Ateneo law school, now First Gentleman Mike Arroyo, makes the supreme sacrifice of going to Las Vegas to support these Filipino legislators and provincial officials in cheering for Mr. Pacquiao. It is quite a bother to bear the heat in the sands of Nevada and be away from the comforts of the presidential palace and his loving First Family. And the political opposition castigates him and his friends unfairly in the Filipino press for going to Las Vegas to promote patriotism and the patrimony of the people? Oh, the hazards of being the First Gentleman . . . there being no fairness on the part of critics whether he is in Vegas or in the homeland.

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Las Vegas attracts more-than one-million Filipino tourists every year. Where in America can Filipino congressmen and provincial governors spend short but quality time in meeting many constituents who are former residents of their districts or province?

And what about the jokes about Mr. Pacquiao's boxing promoter, Bob Arum? Mr. Bob's family name does not rhyme with Tanduay Rhum, which is one of the Filipino congressmen's favorite hard drinks. His surname rhymes more with rumba, which many of the Filipino congressmen and public officials dance with ease at the ballroom – as one of their exercise routines. Legislators and even provincial governors need to exercise, too. (Of course the First Couple's favorite dance is the Lambada, which Her Excellency demonstrated ably at the presidential palace during a visit by publicity-seeking Hollywood actors.)

It is also a fact that many Filipino government officials actually promote not only Philippine-made rum during their trips to Las Vegas and other American cities but also other Filipino products. They wear the Barong Filipino and bring abaca slippers with them so that they could show to the hotel buyers the good quality of the said Filipino cottage-industry products. So, in short, these Filipino legislators, local-government officials and other public servants go to Las Vegas not only to serve as ambassadors of goodwill but also as trade representatives.

Even the rumors that some Filipino dignitaries bring with them starlets and aging stars to Las Vegas are all the product of political intrigues. The truth is that the visiting Filipino dignitaries are merely helping pave the way for these budding Filipino entertainers to make a name in the world's entertainment capital in the likes of the Society of Seven and other Filipinos who made their name in the Strip.

There is also the fact that Las Vegas attracts more-than one-million Filipino-American tourists

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every year. Where in the United States can Filipino congressmen and provincial governors spend short but quality time in meeting the constituents who are former residents of their districts or province? Even if they meet their provincemates at the Blackjack table, they can still do the job. Many Filipino congressmen and governors are experts also in multi-tasking. They can place bets on the table while they explain to their long-lost constituents the peace-and-order situation at their common hometowns. They can operate a slot machine while discussing the investment opportunities in the old hometown. And their detractors see only Las Vegas as a "Sin City" and not the reality that it is actually the "Scene City" – the scenic venue of reunions, business conferences, trade promotions, etceteras, etc., ad infinitum.

And finally it makes sense to tell the Filipino world that even Mr. Pacquiao has been conditioned by the visiting Filipino legislators and public servants to do multi-tasking. Even when he makes the final sparring sessions, Mr. Pacquiao is able to listen to the Filipino congressman and learn from them the tenets of parliamentary procedure, the intricacies of a privilege speech and decorum at the august hall of Congress. Mr. Pacquiao ran for Congress the last election but unfortunately he lost. He may run again in May 2010 and by that time, he would be a seasoned "parliamentarian of the streets" to use an oft-quoted cliché. Yes, Sir, the detractors and critics of our Filipino congressmen and public servants do not tell the truth to the public. Maybe the reason after all, as they say, is "What happens in Las Vegas, stays in Las Vegas." # # #