

# OPINION & FEATURES



## Holding our breath

### EDITORIAL

**I**N less than week, history will turn a new page for not only the United States, but also for the rest of the world.

Even after all the campaigning and the debates, it is still hard to estimate the impact of a particular candidate. Every citizen is entitled to his or her opinion and may decide who to vote based on their faith and belief in a particular candidate.

Both have strong points, but both also have their flaws and weaknesses. McCain is considered by some for his experience – but then again, his age is also viewed as a disadvantage.

Obama, on the other hand, is young and has stressed the change he would bring if elected. As the possibility of having the first black president in US history hangs over our heads, it is hard to imagine that once upon a time a man like him could hardly be considered to run for any political office.

But that is politics – ever changing and with no definite direction. What could be the trend today could change tomorrow, so who we assume to win might take a different turn.

We are all holding our breath now – as we wait to know whom the people will choose to lead this great nation. Will it be Obama or McCain? The whole world is watching. ■

## Boorish, baleful clowns

**B**OORISH, baleful comedians or BBC. That, incidentally, also stands for British Broadcasting Corporation, the latest foreign television network to find it funny insulting Filipinos. But the BBC caper in the show, *Harry and Paul*, churned out by Tiger Aspect Productions, was over hill and into the mud. Imagine, thinking it funny

to have a hapless Filipina maid do a bump and grind ostensibly to please a Briton in need of a woman!

Well, it wasn't funny for the Filipino community in London and in the Philippines. But unlike British hooligans who run amuck at soccer games, the Fil-British community staged a dignified rally in front of BBC and Tiger Aspect headquarters until their respective executives came out to give an expectedly lame, face-saving apology.

**BBC apologizes to the Philippine Embassy in London**

In a letter dated 10 October 2008 to Philippine Ambassador to the Court of St. James's Edgardo Espiritu, BBC Director General Mark Thompson apologizes for the offence caused by the episode of the UK comedy series *Harry and Paul*.

The letter, which the Philippine Embassy received only on 20 October says, "please accept my sincere apologies, on behalf of the BBC, for the offence that this programme caused you."

The apology came following a letter of 3 October from Ambassador Espiritu to BBC Trust Chairman Sir Michael Lyons expressing the former's dismay over an episode of *Harry and Paul*, initially shown on BBC on 26 September and replayed on BBC 2 on 29 September. The episode made an insulting reference to Filipino women, typifying them in a

dual role as domestic workers and sex toys of their British employers.

Ambassador Espiritu also wrote a similar letter to the BBC Complaints Centre, copy furnished Mr. Mark Pritchard, chairman of the All Party Parliamentary Group -Philippines and the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office; Sir Trevor Phillips, head of the UK Equality and Human Rights Commission; the Office of Communications (OFCOM), the independent regulator of the UK communications industries; Sir Christopher Meyer KCMG, head of the UK Press Complaints Commission; London Mayor Boris Johnson; and the Rt. Hon. Harriet Harman MP, UK Secretary of State for Women and Equality.

The episode angered a large number of the 200,000-strong Filipino community in the United Kingdom and led to some leaders of the community to put up an online petition where Filipinos could lodge their protest against BBC and the show's producer, Tiger Aspect Productions. The online petition gathered more than 2,000 supporters within three days.

A silent vigil was also held simultaneously on 17 October in front of the BBC Office in White City, just outside central London, and Tiger Aspect Productions in Soho in central London.

Tiger Aspect Productions Chief Executive Andrew Zein, issued an apology before the members of the Filipino community who joined the Soho vigil.

"We're sorry to anyone who was in any way offended by the programme. This certainly was not our intention," said Zein.

Talk about a lame excuse, this is the kind one would give after shooting someone dead: "I'm sorry for killing you. It was not our intention. We didn't think the bullet could kill."

I had prepared a stinging letter to BBC on behalf of the National Federation of Filipino American Associations (NaFFAA) and was about to mail it when I received Peps Vilanueva's update. I'm no longer going to mail my letter but will print it anyway to drive home one very basic point: If they really think their skit was harmless, why don't they try it using on British women – preferably their own kin? At any rate, here's my letter to those BBCs:

"I am writing on behalf of the National Federation of Filipino American Associations (NaFFAA),

the largest coalition of Filipino community organizations in the United States, representing over 3 million people of Filipino descent in the country. We are standing in solidarity with our Filipino brothers and sisters in the United Kingdom who have been subjected to racist treatment and unwarranted disrespect by your television network. We join the voices of protest now being heard around the world.

"We have seen on YouTube and have read the nauseating recounting of the unmanly insult inflicted on Filipino womanhood and the entire Filipino nation, in your TV program, *Harry and Paul*.

"It perplexes us that a venerable institution like BBC should allow its programming to be infected with such unchivalrous content" broadcast in a country like England where chivalry is supposed to still be in full flower and a woman sits on the royal throne.

"What the producers, writers, directors and performers of the TV program should realize is that they also insulted all women in general, including British womanhood, and their own wives, mothers and daughters. Would they dare show that tasteless skit to the women in their own families? What would the Queen of England say to such vulgarity being passed off as comedy? I assure you, they would hang their heads in shame.

"We Filipinos have always held the British nation in high esteem. We still do. We realize that the British people have no control over the conduct of every one of their fellow citizens. But BBC must surely have some control over those who contribute to its programming. We understand, however, that you refuse to apologize for the garbage that your network has dispensed. Can it, therefore, be assumed that you cannot tell the difference between trash and good taste?"

"For your information, gentlemen, Filipino nationals who work and live in the United Kingdom



and in other cities of the world are there because they are trying to earn an honorable and honest living. Many are nurses, doctors and medical specialists who are caring for your sick. Others are professionals who work in the public and private sectors and help your government and your businesses function. Still others are caregivers, nannies and househelp, taking care of your homes and rearing your young, with the gentleness and affection that working parents are unable to give.

"Is it to be believed that these Filipino women whom hundreds of young Britons regard as surrogate parents, are actually sex toys and playthings of lascivious, mindless British men? Can you explain how you, who depend on them to provide tender, loving care for your young ones, should also regard them with such disrespect?"

"Should Filipino womanhood and the Filipino nation be ashamed of the *Harry and Paul* skit or should you? Like innocent bystanders who have been mischievously showered with mud by an unthinking scoundrel, we Filipinos must now exert great effort to wash ourselves and redeem our ruffled dignity.

"But what about you, Sirs? Will you be able to live this ignominy down? The only elegant option left to you is to apologize."

Well, BBC and Tiger Aspect Productions did. But, as you can see, theirs was a non-apology. (gregmacabenta@hotmail.com)

## The margin of victory

**O**VER two decades ago, I went to my first political party convention in San Francisco, excited to be a delegate in a year when history was being made with the inclusion of the first woman on the presidential ticket, Geraldine Ferraro.

My excitement also stemmed from being part of the leadership of a newly-formed Asian Pacific American Caucus within the Democratic Party, which

gave us for the first time an official presence in a party convention. The VP candidate herself graced our meeting in which we had at most fifty people, but how proud were we that our Caucus was important enough to merit such a visit.

Zoom forward to 2008 and the APIA Caucus now met in a far larger room, and its evening reception had almost a thousand attendees. Delegates from

our community came from all over the country instead of states from both coasts only. Equally important, there were more APIA elected officials at the state and municipal levels than at any other time. Again, we were excited about another historic moment – the nomination of the first African American for the presidency of the United States, the first-ever presidential nominee with special insights into our community, our different cultures and our concerns.

As much as our numbers have swelled in a party convention, however, the only numbers that matter in a national election are our votes in one week. Post-convention excitement has turned into an electoral reality showing that an overwhelming majority of Asian Americans are supportive of Senator Obama. A smaller percentage still remain undecided, however.

For those still making up their minds and those already committed, I want to point out that this is our time, our chance to be part of the change of America. Concerns about the economy drives our vote, as it does with other Americans, but a survey shows that economic worries trouble the APIA community to a degree higher than that expressed by other Americans. This is not a surprise, given our community's long-time focus on forging a strong economic base for ourselves and our families.

Many Asian-Pacific Americans see Senator



Obama as the one most capable of addressing our economic woes. In the three debates with Senator McCain, he has outlined a plan that includes tax breaks for the middle class, reducing healthcare costs for most Americans, job generation through a 'green energy' industry, a time-out for mortgage-holders facing foreclosures, an economic stimulus package proposed even earlier than the one now being considered by the Bush administration, among other measures.

Outside of these specific policy proposals, what anxious Asian Americans and frankly all Americans need most, is to break the psychological hurdle generated by the market free fall – the lack of trust and confidence, which inhibits the creativity,

inventiveness and yes, risk-taking that defines this country and our community, as well.

The promise of Senator Obama is that he can restore precisely the confidence needed to move this nation towards economic revival by his unique ability to articulate and explain to the American people in the clearest, simplest terms what is happening, what can be done and what needs to be done. In so doing, he can erase the fear and consequent inertia that can cripple a people and a nation. His calm and self-assurance in the midst of crisis, coupled with his innate eloquence, will go a long way in providing the leadership to lift this country out of its current psychological mind-set of distrust and failure.

As he has done so far, he can appeal to the country that we can be better than we are. Most important, his campaign has shown that he has the capacity to engage all Americans in crafting solutions necessary to fix an ailing economy, just as he has mobilized all Americans, including Asian Pacific Islander Americans, to his candidacy.

His is the voice sorely needed for the difficult times ahead. So, let's have our own voices, through our votes, ensure that Senator Obama is the one we hear from the White House after November 4th. Given our pivotal numbers in critical battleground states like Nevada, Virginia and Florida, APIAs can actually provide that margin of victory that puts him over the top. Now, let's go vote!

Irene Natividad is President of the Global Summit of Women and former President of the National Women's Political Caucus.



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