

OPINION & FEATURES

A tax on learning

READING broadens horizons, regardless of the subject. But for the Bureau of Customs, only books used in schools can be classified as “educational”—a category that exempts an imported book from taxes and duties. The BOC has since revised its rules, slapping taxes on the importation of many international bestsellers and other books that the bureau believes do not fall under the categories of “educational, scientific or cultural.”

The BOC’s move, endorsed by Finance Undersecretary Espele Sales, is based on a review of Republic Act 8047 or the Book Publishing Industry Development Act of 1995. Customs and finance officials said RA 8047 exempted from taxes and duties “only books or raw materials to be used in book publishing.” Critics pointed out that slapping the taxes and import duties violated the 1950 Florence Agreement on the Importation of Educational, Scientific and Cultural Materials, to which the Philippines was a signatory in 1952. The treaty provides for the duty-free importation of books to guarantee the free flow of “educational, scientific and cultural materials” among countries. But BOC and finance officials reportedly believe that novels and other international bestsellers do not fall under any of these categories.

The new rule has reportedly led to a halt in book importations in recent months, and the absence of new book titles at popular chains. A number of those books are geared toward young readers. With the Internet, television and Wii competing for children’s attention these days, parents count themselves lucky when their children bother to read books. Many youths who enjoy light reading such as the *Harry Potter* series and the *Twilight* vampire chronicles eventually go on to heavier subjects including non-fiction and classic literature. Book enjoyment is carried on into adulthood. Does education stop after college graduation?

Taxes and import duties are passed on to consumers by book dealers, and higher prices could discourage book reading among Filipinos with a limited budget. Duty-free importation has allowed Filipinos to enjoy books at prices that are often lower than those in the sources of origin of the imported items. The government should review whether it wants to deprive Filipinos of this source of learning and enjoyment. (*Philstar.com*)



Photo Courtesy of Philstar.com

Two less thieves

THE good news is that there seems to be a growing consciousness among our people of the need for involvement and militancy in the presidential elections in 2010.

After a disastrous Estrada presidency and with the current Arroyo nightmare, several groups of businessmen, civil society activists, media owners and political power brokers have begun to launch high profile campaigns with the stated goal of ensuring a clean and honest election.

Because the election is just a year away—assuming it is held—it is possible to sustain the mounting enthusiasm and energy until the crucial moment. The last senatorial elections, where big-spending Arroyo pets like Pechay ended up in the camote patch, proved that a militant citizenry can foil even well-funded attempts to cook the polls. “*Akomismo*,” a campaign conceived by some ad agency friends and, from reports, is being actively supported by genuinely concerned business groups, is one such effort. “*Boto mo, ipatrol mo*,” a movement apparently spearheaded by the ABS-CBN group and supported by high profile business and civil society leaders, has just been launched. I am aware of other similar activities being planned and may soon be mounted.



STREET TALK

Greg B. Macabenta

This is great. Thank heavens for an aroused citizenry.

But ensuring that the next president is chosen in an electoral process that is not Garcified or Arrorized (rhymes with terrorized) only addresses one of the many problems that beleaguer our hapless country.

One of the most obvious problems, of course, is the fact that the political opponents of Arroyo, many of whom are swine, will use these laudable efforts to help them take over the

pigsty.

But the biggest problem, sadly, is ourselves. We, the People.

Unless this aspect of the problem is addressed, we may end up dealing with what comic king, Dolphy, wanted to avoid when he brushed aside suggestions that he should run for president.

“My problem is, I might win and then I won’t know what to do.”

Indeed, the problem is that, all these efforts to ensure a clean and honest presidential election may result in an honestly and cleanly elected President from Hell.

Or, just as badly, it might result in an honestly and cleanly elected reasonably competent president who will lead a Citizenry from Purgatory.

The harsh fact is that, while everyone is

clamoring for change, it is doubtful that we really know what kind of change it is that we need—or knowing, it is doubtful that we are willing to accept the trade-off to achieve that change.

The trade-off will have to come in terms of national discipline, civic responsibility, a clear understanding of right and wrong and the willingness to do what is right—even if it hurts.

Even if it means giving up certain comforts and privileges. Being willing to line up and await our turn instead of jumping the line by dropping names or greasing pockets.

Even if it means overhauling some of the most endearing qualities of being *Pinoy*—*pakikisama* and loyalty to friends and family, whether good, bad or indifferent.

Even if it means selflessness to the point of self-deprivation and sacrifice.

Are we, as a people, capable of instilling these stringent standards on ourselves? Yes we are. Can we do it? Yes, we have.

When we Filipinos are overseas, we readily—and cheerfully—adjust to the rules and standards imposed by the host societies and governments. We learn to wait in line, follow traffic rules, work hard at our places of employment, get promoted without using padrinos, live within our means, pay taxes and even stay sober during weekdays.

The reason—to be blunt about it—is that, when we break the rules abroad, we are made to pay for it. In the US, the children of the president have been cited for drunkenness. Member of Congress are routinely issued traffic tickets and, just as routinely, thrown in jail for corruption. In

the Middle East, violators get their heads chopped off.

Moving closer to home, the way Dick Gordon imposed strict traffic rules in Olongapo and in Subic proves that we can submit to discipline if there is a consistent and fair enforcement of ordinances and laws.

With due respect to the well-meaning folks behind the “*akomismo*” and “*boto mo, ipatrol mo*” movements (many of whom are skilled marketing persons), I would like to suggest that these efforts be phased, starting with a frank and merciless self-evaluation and the imposition on ourselves of the standards that we propose to impose on the country’s leaders.

When we mindlessly litter the streets and dispose of our garbage every which way, we are hardly in any position to get rid of the garbage in our political system.

When we break traffic rules, drop names, pay bribes, cheat on our corporate taxes, expect special treatment and feel entitled to a fast buck, we are hardly in a position to expect legislators and presidential family members to become exemplars of decency and discipline.

The harsh fact is that the dishonest and abusive among us are not just the politicians. If we look in the mirror, we will see who they are.

I keep being asked what can be done to minimize thievery in society. My response:

“Don’t steal. I don’t. That makes two less thieves.”

Indeed, the cure for our national ills is, “*Tayo mismo!*” (*gregmacabenta@hotmail.com*)

Food and food for thought



AT LARGE

Rina Jimenez-David

DEFENSE Secretary Gilbert “Gibo” Teodoro enters the function room of a downtown restaurant quietly, catching our group of media men and women by surprise.

After dispensing with a few pleasantries, he huddles with the restaurant manager, ordering dishes with such familiarity it’s obvious he knows the menu well. As the manager exits, Teodoro explains that Sea Palace had long been a favorite but that “I haven’t been able to eat here lately as often as I would want.”

But to his credit and to our delight, the dishes that arrive are not only good, but quite a ways from the standard repertoire of sweet-and-sour pork and lumpiang Shanghai. Two outstanding examples: breaded gabi studded with roasted almonds with a green vegetable sauce; and a goat meat stew with a pungent side-dish of soybean curd providing the needed punch. “There should also be some lemon rind with it,” he rues, and I could just imagine how the piquant touch would have certainly enlivened the dish.

I had heard that Teodoro is quite a mean cook himself, a calling developed, he joked, because “my mother didn’t cook.” As with most everyone who knows their way through a kitchen, he also enjoys fine food, and knows very well where to find it. “You should taste his roast beef!” says Teodoro’s wife Nikki, who took over his congressional district in Tarlac and now heads the newly created House committee on children’s welfare. Asked if she herself can cook, she smiles and states: “I can, but I don’t volunteer.”

So we know what a Gilbert Teodoro presidency would be like, at least in one aspect: lots of fine food served in Malacañang, with the President personally taking over kitchen chores, perhaps.

We all know what we were invited for. Teodoro has just announced his “availability” as the administration’s standard-bearer in next year’s elections, and the dinner was one of many “getting-to-know-you” sessions.

But the process is less tedious than one might expect. Though he often comes across as tight-lipped and thoughtful, that night Teodoro opened up on many aspects of his life: his relationship with his uncle Danding Cojuangco as well as his other Cojuangco relatives, including Sen. Noynoy Aquino; growing up with a “distant” father who allowed the emotional barriers to be breached only on the last few days of his life; and how he has consciously adopted a different style of parenting with his own son.

Of course, there are also all sorts of policy questions thrown at the presidential aspirant, and being an experienced lawyer, he answers them with ease, and requisite gravity. That was one thing I had liked about the Secretary while watching a replay of the ANC-Ateneo Forum featuring a number of presidential wannabes that marked the start of the presidential race, a full year before the elections.

Though most of the other candidates had unabashedly laid the nation’s problems at the doorstep of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, Teodoro stuck to his guns, risking boring his audience with a recital of accomplishments when asked what the President had done right. He was thoughtful and considered every question carefully, and his replies bore evidence of not just his intelligence (expected of a bar topnotcher) but also of his “no drama” personality.

As defense Secretary, he says, he is determined to carry out the reforms initiated by his predecessors, while meeting the demands of peace-keeping in a resource-poor setting. “Modernization,” which has previously conjured images of massive free-fleeting with costly equipment and arms, can only be carried out in terms of massive recruitment and training of personnel, he says. “We cannot even raise the amount of money needed to buy one new helicopter,” he points out. So far, he says, the greater problem has been the lack of soldiers who are supposed to act as “deterrents” to lawless elements all over the country. With increased recruitment, he says, it should simply be a matter of time before the military puts an end to insurgents and troublemakers.

On the problem of corruption in government, he thinks it would be best addressed by increasing compensation for government officials, though of course the problem seems far more complex than simply material rewards. But he cites his father’s record as a civil servant, serving for more than a decade as SSS administrator with nary a hint of scandal or whisper of corruption.

He squirms uncomfortably only when someone brings up his TV ad, purportedly a commercial calling for citizen involvement in disaster risk management, but obviously meant to introduce him to a bigger public.

“It didn’t really work,” is the consensus around the table, with one guest suggesting he fire his ad agency. Teodoro only smiles tentatively, breaking out in laughter when told that someone had vowed “not to vote for all the candidates who put out ads during the Pacquiao-Hatton fight.”

In all, meeting with Gilbert Teodoro proved to be a most pleasant evening, filling one with optimism that even in a crowded field of aspirants, there are candidates who offer us food for thought. (*Inquirer.net*)



Main Office:
1150 Wilshire Boulevard
Los Angeles, CA 90017-1904
Tel: (213) 250-9797 • Fax: (213) 481-0854
e-mail: info@asianjournalinc.com
http://www.asianjournal.com

Manila Office:
Suite 208, The Manila Bank Corp. Bldg.
6772 Ayala Ave., Makati City 1226
Tel.: (632) 893-1720 • Telefax: (632) 813-8746

New York and New Jersey:
5 Penn Plaza, Ste. 1932, New York, NY 10119
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2500 Plaza Five, Harborside Financial Center,
Jersey City, NJ 07311
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