

# **Filipino Reporter**

**FAIR, FEARLESS, FACTUAL**

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## **Lessons from the Eighties**

**By Reuben S. Seguritan**

This is the time when we feel compelled to look back at the past decade and reflect on our personal accomplishments and shortcomings. And while we're wrapped up in this rumination, we might as well take perspective of a broader milieu and ask ourselves how we fared in our involvement with the varied accomplishments of a booming Filipino-American community.

There is no doubt that the community grew by such magnitude that a host of Filipino organizations sprouted in every major city. Filipino migration overflowed the annual immigration quota to a point where even spouses of permanent residents and adult unmarried children of citizens had to wait 6 to 8 years before their names finally go to the roll call.

Last year alone, 24,580 Filipinos became citizens, the largest group overstepping Mexicans, Vietnamese, Koreans, and Chinese. The Immigration office also reported that 50,697 Filipinos were taken in as new immigrants, ranking second only to Mexico. And with thousands of "illegals" coming out in the open with the 1986 Amnesty Law, the Filipino population subsequently swelled well beyond the two millionth mark.

### **Moneyed and well-mannered**

With the increasing migrant wave of professionals, it was not uncommon to see a community of doctors, nurses, accountants, engineers, and computer specialists who are well-to-do, if not already affluent and vastly liquid with their accumulated savings and investment equities established through the years.

As one of the many ethnic groups in America, Filipinos generally were among the well-behaved. We did not make sorry spectacles of ourselves in some big way as did the Mafia and its complex network of mobsters or the Dragon Gangs of Chinatown, nor were we known to be peddlers of illicit drugs or importers of terrorists.

Occasionally, we have had to identify with the bad eggs in a number of cases, such as the physicians caught in medicaid fraud. But by and large, the eighties was the decade when many advanced themselves socially and economically.

### **Unity failed to evolve**

The eighties was a harbinger of dramatic and historical moments in the world's stage. For us, it meant tumultuous political events in our own country and for many, a reawakening of national pride as all Filipinos were given a fresh mandate in the practice of democratic rights through a new, high-minded government. The incredible four-day revolution back home stirred many hearts and minds, and as was inevitable, Filipino-American organizations sprouted to voice their exultation and support, and a few, their opposition.

But like the event, the ideals and enthusiasm fizzled out even before any one of them could evolve into a solid, unified political energy from which every other smaller political organization could rally to, to recharge its own fledgling leadership and party platform. With all the opportunities to unite and reassert our pride and rights as part of a growing force in American society, we did not do better than to watch more of the same loosely-organized groups overstep each other for a share of the limelight.

Except for California and Hawaii, no Filipino was elected to a major office or appointed to a position of power. Nevertheless, considering the high population of Filipinos in those areas and the intellectual and financial resources available, we should have done better in taking the community to a level of political prominence.

The image of unity among ethnic groups is paramount to a composite integrated society. To be united in the aspiration for a stronger community is half the battle won for the transition into an important political entity. As one among many other minority groups competing for the attention and favors of a representative government official, we need prominence and power to get decision-makers to take a serious look at our grievances. We need that power to amend laws that are prejudicial to our race.

### **Price of political apathy**

Through the course of the decade, we didn't respond to the challenges in a manner of urgency as demanded by the events. Inevitably, we had to pay the price of our political apathy.

We came across laws and government policies that smacked of racial discrimination. Our War Veterans' rights to citizenship was dealt a fatal blow. Foreign Medical Graduates were subjected to disparate tests and standards, and most recently an even more sinister nursing law took effect. Despite the initial hue and cry raised by some against these longstanding issues, important revisions were never made to strike out the discriminatory undertones.

### **War veterans injustice**

The absence of a potent political infrastructure that would otherwise represent the community's needs curbs our ability to make waves for changes in existing laws. The Filipino War Veterans' problem, for instance, was for very long viewed as a case of injustice. While other countries were given three years from 1943 to 1964 for the naturalization of their war veterans in recognition of their service to the US, the Philippines was only given seven months right up to the law's expiration in December 1946 to exercise this right.

Though the injustice appeared to have been corrected in 1975 with a California federal court granting them citizenship after the ruling that the government had erred in halting its naturalization operations during the time the law was in effect, naturalization applications were rejected anew in 1988 with another ungracious ruling. The US Supreme Court in the case of INS vs. Pangilinan, held that the veterans cannot be naturalized because there are simply no laws authorizing the courts the right to confer citizenship. Thus, the hopes of thousands more, caught in the current of change, were dashed.

### **FMG discrimination**

The eighties too saw mounting evidence of discriminatory practices against foreign Medical Graduates (FMGs). When Congress passed a law in 1981, granting immigration amnesty to FMGs licensed as of January 9, 1978, little did we know that our relief could soon turn to dismay with a subsequent policy stiffening procedures in the selection of candidates for training and the considerable reduction in the entry of foreign doctors.

For those who were at all allowed to practice, FMGs faced unequal treatment in licensure procedures, educational reciprocity, staff promotions and hospital privileges. These unfair practices prevailed despite congressional findings that FMGs provided the same quality of service as did American graduates.

### **Nursing exploitation**

Among other professional expatriates, Philippine nurses probably were the ones hit hardest by harsh US laws of the 80s. Over the years, as the need for nurses spiralled, so were laws continually modified which for the most part smacked of exploitation.

While the US encouraged the growth of nursing education in our country and quickly gobbled up our graduates to fill up its critical nursing shortage, it continued to formulate hurdles, from the introduction in 1980 of the CGFNS as a screening test, to the 1987 law limiting their H-1 visa to a maximum of five-years only, and finally to the most recent law signed by President Bush setting tougher procedures for new recruits.

### **Encouraging signs**

Despite our shortcomings, there were some encouraging signs that cannot be overlooked. In the vibrant community of New York and New Jersey for example, more Filipinos actively sought to be part of political parties which almost resulted in the election of a councilman in Jersey City. Public forums, breakfast clubs and leadership seminars sprang up and engaged important issues of the day. For us Filipinos who have yet to get familiar with public debates within the larger context of the American society, these activities made up an important step toward politicization.

Finally, the sad Guce case aroused unprecedented indignation among members of the community; indignation that aligned itself more to feelings of sympathy for the family and disillusionment for the social system. Despite apparent misjudgment of the Guce family in delaying to enlist community support and on dodging their reliance on Filipino lawyers who, with their understanding of our unique culture and thinking, would have made a good case out of it, a local case of child molestation became a concern among Filipino Americans everywhere.

Many identified themselves with the poor family who had to bear the rough treatment and indifference and the realities of racial undercurrents in the American justice system. Although the case is far from resolved, it jolted the docile out of us and started the course of keeping the community united and vigilant in its resolve for fairer and better treatment.