

PERSONS ENTERPRISES PLACES  
(PEP Diversity)



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**“DUAL CITIZENSHIP LAWS... GOLDEN PARACHUTE FOR THE RECESSION ?”  
(SOME REFLECTIONS FROM THE HOTEL WILLARD LOBBY AT PRES. GMA’S  
VISIT)**

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It was a drizzly, muggy night in Washington, D.C., on July 29, 2009. What were Filipino-Americans (Fil-Ams) doing at the Willard.. .yes... the expensive Willard Hotel, in the sweltering summer, during a very low point of the economic recession, when unemployment rate was at a high of 9.4 percent? What were they up to at the Willard? The answer to the question is apparently esoteric, and a sign of the times, making it an appropriate debut topic for this column.

The Willard Hotel, close to the White House, is reputed as the “residence for presidents” because it has sheltered many U.S. Presidents. For instance, Abe Lincoln, sought refuge there, the night before his Inaugural, due to assassination attempts. But on July 29th, the Hotel stepped out of character. Guests were fascinated by a different crowd. Absent were the typical “lobbyist” whose work is to persuade legislators to vote in favor of their clients’ interest. According to urban legend, the word ‘lobbyist’ was coined after the “Lobby” of the Willard, where the art of “lobbying” was born. On that night, the Fil-Am community and the press, regal in Filipiniana attire, filled the Lobby, waiting in bated breath for the arrival of Philippine President, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (“GMA”) and her party; GMA was slated for a meet with U.S. President Barack Obama, at the White House the next day on counter-terrorism and global warming.

But for the airport delays, explained GMA, she would have timely arrived, for the community reception, hosted by the Philippine Embassy and FILUSA. But the waiting was not wasted time. It gave Fil-Ams a chance to linger at the lobby, engage in countless amenities, and of course, discourses. The political significance of the GMA trip having been all said, it’s now worthwhile to look back at the Willard event, to focus on the sentiments expressed by the Fil-Am crowd that night. It appears that “homesick” Filipino-Americans were looking to the President of their home country for potential answers to their economic predicament in America. In my observation, the Fil-Am community seeks a “two-way street” between the U.S and the Philippines, for their life journey. Historically, the 100-year pattern of Filipino immigration to the U.S. was mostly one way towards a green card; the typical Filipino U.S. immigrants

traditionally avoided at all cost, the permanent return to the home country whether voluntarily or through deportation. These days however, Fil-Ams, are consumed by thoughts of the Philippines as a retirement, or investment destination. Is their vision a temporary coping mechanism due to the economic recession? The answer is a resounding “yes,” based on my observations at the Willard event.

GMA has her finger pressed on the Fil-Am pulse. At her belated dinner speech at the Willard, she profusely gave thanks for the dollar remittances from U.S. and other overseas workers; she effusively bragged about the strong and resilient Philippine economy, in the backdrop of a global recession; she enthusiastically expressed her policy to give Fil-Ams the option to go back home or to go back and forth between two countries. It’s all about economics.

Can the Fil-Ams realistically look upon the Philippines as the parachute for retirement or even for a temporary “economic bailout”? The U.S. economic recession is the major force that turns the flight of Filipino U.S. immigrants/citizens back to the Philippines. The idea of Fil-Ams having their cake and eating it too, is not new. Philippine Dual Citizenship Laws fueled those thoughts when the Philippines passed Republic Act No. 9225 on August 29, 2003. The “Dual Citizenship Law,” which is known as the “Citizenship Retention and Re-acquisition Act of 2003” grants to certain eligible natural-born Filipinos the benefits of retention or re-acquisition of their Philippine citizenship, after becoming citizen of other countries like the United States. The law grants full civil, economic and political rights under Philippine laws, such as: (1.) right to vote; (2.) own private lands and condos; (3.) Election/ Appointment to Public Office, upon renunciation of foreign citizenship, and establishment of residence; (4.) Practice a profession, under a license; (5) have Philippine passport, visa-free entry and unlimited stay in the Philippines (6. ) Own or invest in businesses not open to foreigners such as: Public utilities; (b.) Exploration, development and utilization of natural resources; (c.) Educational institutions; (d.) Mass media, etc.; On the other hand, the duties attached to a “dual citizen,” are: (1.) to pay taxes on income earned in the Philippines; (2.) support and defend the Constitution and obey Philippine laws and accept the Oath of Allegiance ( RA 9225).

Obviously, the ramifications of dual citizenship to Fil-Ams, is hard to fathom at this point. RA 9225 is only about six years old, and is largely untested and uninterpreted, on either side of the fence: Philippine and U.S. Immigration Laws. The question worth asking Fil-Ams, is “what they hope and intend to give back to the Philippines, in exchange for retaining or re-acquiring Philippine Citizenship, in the light of rights and privileges attached to it”. The issue of Dual citizenship is not all about temporary economic fixes or political ambitions. Largely, it is a question of intent, short term and long term. The question of intent is relevant because conflict of interest between the two countries constantly arise, in all aspects.

Going back to the Willard Lobby that rainy night on July 29, 2009, GMA’s speech admitted to a direct relationship, between the positive state of Philippine economy and the dollar remittances from overseas workers. The ultimate question that Fil-Ams should ask, and that GMA and her Government must address is, “ how , and for how long the Philippine economy thrive, if in the first place, much of Philippine GNP or GDP is anchored on foreign remittances? In other words, if we all decided to come home from abroad, who will send home the bacon? How will we survive?

For the most part, Fil-Ams still have to find ways and means to weather the storm of the U.S. economic recession, independently of what Philippine economy has to offer. In the coming issues, this column by the “Filipino Washingtonian,” will discover, persons, enterprises and places, towards new perspectives and solutions from the point of view of Metro Washington, D.C ., a city so small, yet ironically so political, diverse and globally connected and oriented.

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