

Liaisons

Americans should take a lesson from the Filipinos and the French. Take a lesson about what? The French call it liaisons d'amour. The United States is currently embroiled in l'affaire Petraeus. Cable news, network TV, newspapers, blogs, talk radio, Twitter, et alia are all weighing in ad nauseam. Let's take a step back.

When former French President François Mitterand was buried with state honors in 1996, his wife and children stood on one side and his mistress and their daughter stood next to them. It was apparently not a huge deal. It may not be an iconic image, but the photographs at the burial site show these two women in Mitterand's life, both dressed in dark coats, and both standing behind his coffin. This would probably never happen in the U.S.

Back in the Philippines, there is the case of Joseph Ejercito, better known as Joseph Estrada. The latter is his screen name, which he carried into his political career. Before going into politics Estrada was a popular movie actor. He specialized in action and gangster genres. His most famous portrayal was that of a Manila gangster and street punk named Salonga who was shot in the head at the age of 27. Starting as a small city mayor, Estrada progressed to Senator then Vice President before getting elected as President in 1998.

Estrada's wife is Dr. Loi Pimentel, a psychiatrist by training. Together, they have 3 children. Dr. Loi later became a Senator. One of their sons is currently a Senator. It doesn't end there. Estrada has had at least 5 mistresses and 7 other children. (Estrada's children use the surname Ejercito.) There may be others, but no one is keeping track. A son by one mistress is a congressman and the mistress, herself, is the town mayor. Estrada's romantic entanglements were always well known. He never concealed them. None of his opponents ever made an issue of it. Occasionally someone in the media would ask, but Estrada's answer was typically "what's your problem?" The electorate yawned when Estrada's personal life was brought up. Everyone knew the details from his acting days. Although Estrada did not get a majority of the votes during the 1998 presidential election, his plurality of 37% was greater than those of the next two candidates combined.

Then there is the even more spectacular 85 year old Ramon Revilla Sr. He has acknowledged having 72 children by 16 different women. That is not a typo. Polygamy is unlawful in the Philippines, although Muslims are allowed to have the traditional four wives. Like Estrada, Revilla was a movie actor, becoming a Senator in 1992. Many movie actors in the Philippines cap their careers by running for public office. Entertainers as a group have been highly successful in politics. There are now dynasties started by famous actors. The Estradas and the Revillas are just two examples. Ramon Sr. was followed by Ramon Jr. or "*Bong*" in the Senate, succeeding his father, who had already served two terms. (Senators are limited to two terms in the Philippines.) Bong's wife is the Congresswoman for their district. A younger brother is the mayor of their home town. Americans shouldn't sneer. Politicians turned actors are not uncommon; there's Fred Thompson, Arnold Schwarzenegger and of course Ronald Reagan. How about comedians like Senator Al Franken?

Another Philippine President, Ferdinand Marcos, had an American mistress. She was a not-so-famous actress and somewhat beyond her prime when she became entangled with Marcos. What made the difference in this case is that the mistress talked publicly about the affair and exhibited the jewelry that Marcos supposedly gave her. She also

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audio taped their trysts. Unfortunately, video cams were large and unwieldy at the time (1968-1970). Otherwise, we would have been treated to a sitting president caught in interesting postures. The tape wound up in the hands of Marcos' opponents so the tape was played endlessly on the radio. A university even broadcast the tape on public speakers. I think all they wanted to do was embarrass Marcos. The answer to your question is no. I have never heard, nor have any desire to hear, the tapes.

General Douglas MacArthur was a revered hero in the Philippines, at least to my parent's generation. But MacArthur was not immune to temptation and had a mistress during the time he spent in Manila, even taking the young woman to Washington, DC. MacArthur embroiled himself in a legal suit he filed against a muckraking journalist, but when faced with the public disclosure of the affair, he dropped the suit. The young lady was reputedly paid off to leave the scene.

Filipinos use the Spanish word "*querida*" for mistress. I'm not sure if Spaniards use it in the same context. There are Tagalog slang words but *querida* is the most commonly used term. When any Filipino who is prominent in business or politics is revealed to have a *querida*, the reaction is always muted. That is, if there is any reaction at all. To my knowledge, it has never become an issue in Philippine national affairs (pun intended). It certainly didn't hurt the careers of politicians like Estrada, Revilla and Marcos. None of the information above is news to anyone following Philippine politics.

You might say it all started in the Bible. Remember Abraham in the Book of Genesis? His wife was Sarah, who was described early on as "barren." Abraham had a child by the "handmaiden" Hagar, whom they named Ishmael. Later on, Sarah was able to have a child, who was named Isaac.

There really isn't anything new under the sun. On second thought, Americans should not take a lesson from the French or Filipinos. As a good friend pointed out, if a man is willing to violate his marital vows, where will he stop? Can he be trusted to honor any other vow he has taken?

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November 27, 2012