

Keynote Address to the 30th Biennial National Student Press Congress
and 60th Annual National Student Press Convention of the CEGP
Baguio City
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May Your Tribe Increase

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Representative
Fourth Congressional District of Quezon Province

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MY DEAR FRIENDS,

It is not often that I get to enjoy the company of the young, especially the best and the brightest of our land. And rarer still is the occasion that I get to mingle with the unique breed made doubly special by virtue of their craft and calling – the student journalists.

It thus gives me great pleasure and pride to be invited to keynote this gathering of the country's oldest, most historic and most prestigious organization of campus journalists, the College Editors Guild of the Philippines.

Today, the CEGP holds its 30th Biennial National Student Press Congress and 60th Annual National Student Press Convention at a time of heightening crisis and urgency. As we gather here in earnest amidst this misty city of pines, the island of

Mindanao lies prostrate and bleeding in an escalating conflict that is hurtling our whole country anew in the abyss of war. To make matters worse, the fulcrum of crisis now appears to be spinning more uncontrollably as bomb explosions repeatedly rock Metro Manila, expanding the theater of conflict.

It is in such context that the theme of your joint conventions assumes added exigency. Indeed, no more opportune time is there for the CEGP to issue its call: "Renew our commitment to patriotism and democracy! Wield our pens and unite with the people for the defense of press freedom and democratic rights!"

In these much troubled, inauspicious times, you, the student writer, are called upon to carry out your pivotal role as seekers after the truth and catalysts of change. Even as you write on campus matters, you are likewise bade to probe into the darkening landscape of our country and help throw light on a situation that is inexorably pushing our whole country in the bottomless pit of war.

No truer is this than today. And especially none more so than with the student writer who toils on a daily grind to put out the campus newspaper. He or she must also know how to wield the pen in opening the eyes of fellow students to the problems around them and stirring them to work for change in both the school campus and the larger social arena.

What former UP President S.P. Lopez, himself a former *Collegian* editor and alumnus of the CEGP, once said of poetry may be said of writing in general. "**Writing is the criticism of life.**" The maker of literature – or "literature in a hurry" as journalism has come to be described – is more than a decorative artist; he is more than a coiner of phrases or stringer of verses. He is both a seer and critic, a mover and shaker of the world.

Another writer, the iconoclast Ralph Waldo Emerson, perhaps said it best: "**The experience of each new age requires a new confession.**"

The roster of CEGP editors and writers in every generation who stood up to tyranny and oppression and laid their lives in the process eloquently speak of a tradition that has evolved from merely being a



chronicler of events into an active agent of social change. A review of the rich and colorful history of the CEGP itself would reveal how the guild has painstakingly forged ahead from its beginnings as a socio-civic organization into a militant, patriotic alliance of student newspapers and journalists.

I know it has not been easy trying to wield the pen and keep the faith at the same time in a country, which seems always to have more of the worst of times than the best of it. Fourteen years after the fall of the most oppressive government in post-war Philippine history, violations of campus press freedom remain rampant nationwide. These include the outright closure of student newspapers, the suspension or expulsion of editors and staff, censorship, withholding of newspaper funds, and so many other forms and patterns of harassment and intimidation.

Let not those who think that withholding student publication funds or outrightly closing down a newspaper will effectively gag the criticism. Censorship never works. It is ultimately self-defeating because censorship only exposes the censor and repression further invites greater protest.

However, my young friends, let me note at this point that the correct course of action lies not in simply rejecting in toto Republic Act No. 7079, or the Campus Journalism Act of 1991, as a failed piece of legislation. The better alternative is for all of us to close ranks and join hands in pushing for improvements and amendments to the law, plugging the loopholes and ensuring the proper implementation of Campus Journalism Act. With your support in the legislative front, we can emerge stronger in the fight to assert press freedom and democratic rights.

In any case, I shall always remain one with you in your campaign for the reopening of all closed student publications, the mandatory establishment of student publications in schools without any, the mandatory collection of subscription fees, the imposition of penalties, accountability and administrative sanctions for all types of offenses or violations to deter all forms of campus press suppression, as well as providing for legal assistance to campus journalists subjected to suppression and harassment.



In the Lower House, I have already sponsored or co-sponsored resolutions to this effect, including calling for an immediate investigation on the implementation of the Campus Journalism Act. My young friends, I ask you not to lose heart in the sway of the law nor in its ability to sway the balance to the favor of those whose rights are being constantly trampled and thus need its protection the most.

Before I end, let me just say this about an issue that is daily entrapping our country in a deadly spiraling cycle of violence.

It would be dreadfully wrong for the national government to apply the military solution to the conflict in Mindanao to the exclusion of political options. There is no glory, no real victory in an all-out war that does not distinguish between military objectives and the civilian population.

Trying to defeat a rebellion primarily through military means will only generate greater human rights violations and spur resistance from those who feel crushed by the weight of the military boot. The strategy of total war under past dispensations has not only proved counter-productive, morally unsustainable and extremely wasteful of human and scarce economic resources. It has in fact failed to strategically stop the insurgency.



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Let us be reminded of a lesson from the Marcos dictatorship. This is that neither acts of violence nor militarization can solve the problems of law and order that are the given reasons for their being. As the late Senator Jose Diokno, one of our foremost human rights advocates, once said: ***“Because militarization is inherently repressive, it breeds dissent and resistance. Militarization is a self-fulfilling prophecy: it creates the very conditions which ‘justify’ it.”***

A way must be found to break out of the arena of suffering and bloodshed. The fate of our country hangs on the balance. We choose the military option and we shall irretrievably sink in the abyss of war. We take up the challenge of peace and we can shift the conflict back to the negotiating table and stop the slide of the country into deepening armed conflict.

Let us collectively appeal to the national government and all the rebel groups to cease all military offensives and exhaust all peaceful means of resolving the Mindanao conflict. Let us urge the national government to initiate confidence-building measures that will lead to the resumption of peace negotiations between the MILF as well as the NDF and seriously and resolutely address the roots of war.

I know the call for a just and enduring peace strikes a chord in all of you gathered here today. I pray that you, the standard bearer of "Generation Next," the inheritors of the noble tradition of CEGP stalwarts Wenceslao Vinzons, Renato Constantino and Antonio Tagamolila, will ever remain true to the challenge of your calling. In the words of the eminent Joseph Pulitzer, to –

"always fight for progress and reform, never tolerate injustice of corruption, always oppose privileged cliques and public plunderers, never lack sympathy with the poor, always remain devoted to the public welfare, never be satisfied with merely printing news, be drastically independent, never be afraid to attack the wrong, whether by predatory plutocracy or predatory poverty."

On this note, I warmly congratulate the CEGP on the holding of these joint national conventions to further strengthen and consolidate the guild into the new millennium. May you never falter, may your tribe increase.

Mabuhay ang CEGP! Mabuhay ang sambayanang Pilipino!

