

On My Mind
1/1/99

Three hundred and sixty-four days from now, the next millennium will arrive. The occasion has not only religious and folkloric implications, but the date has distinct economic implications as well. There is, first and foremost, what has become known as the Y2K problem - the issue of computer technology's ability to cope with, in effect, two zeros - as in the year 2000. That problem has implications for wherever computers are used to conduct business - in the private or public sector - all over the world.

A second economic implication of the new millennium is more limited - it relates only to those geographic areas that border the International Date Line - where the year 2000 will first arrive. Several island groups in the South Pacific are planning to celebrate the start of the new millennium with elaborate ceremonies, in the hope and expectation that offering tourists the opportunity to be among the first to greet the new millennium will boost their economy, be financially rewarding.

Oddly enough, however, neither Guam nor the CNMI have made any visible effort to capitalize on the fact that - in the northern hemisphere, at least - they are 'where America's day begins,' and that they therefore would be an appropriate, and relatively accessible, place for Americans to celebrate the beginning of the new millennium.

If this is where America's day begins, isn't this also where America's second millennium begins? The public relations moguls, it seems to me, are missing a golden opportunity.

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Another golden opportunity that it looks like the CNMI is not only missing, but in fact, killing through neglect, is the Dynasty Casino on Tinian. If the projections of the Dynasty's revenue were indeed real, and realistic - and at one time those projected revenues comprised a significant portion of the CNMI's budget - why is it that expansion of Tinian's airport runways isn't already well underway? Why isn't construction of those runways the very top priority for everyone in government and in the private sector - from the legislature and the Ports Authority to the Chamber of Commerce and HANMI? Why is it that nothing is happening, if all it takes to generate millions in revenue is a longer runway?

I was told, quite laconically, that the FAA has now given approval to build 1/4 of a new runway, and that bids were expected to be let out in the near future. At that rate, it could take years before a full-length runway was completed. Without a miracle, it's hard to see how the Dynasty can survive that long. In fact, it's rumored that it will be closing in a matter of months.

Perhaps the Dynasty can become a tourist attraction as the biggest white elephant in the whole Pacific?

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And speaking of sources of funding, another opportunity that seems to have been totally overlooked is the savings to the CNMI if our Washington Rep became a non-voting delegate to the U.S. Congress. Then all the expenditures for that office, currently paid for through CNMI funds, would be paid for by the U.S. Congress.

Though perhaps not a saving of too many millions, it would, nonetheless, constitute a savings every year. Nor would it appear all that difficult to attain. There is already support in the U.S. Congress, and it has Guam Delegate Robert Underwood's support as well. A letter from the CNMI Legislature endorsing the change would very likely get that effort back on track.

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The start of a new year inevitably brings a lot of good intentions - to do better, to do differently, to do something new; to improve one's self, to improve relations with others, to make up for past transgressions..... The intentions aren't always carried out, or if so, are often carried out for only a short time. But the exercise of making New Year's resolutions - of putting intentions into words - is, nonetheless, a good one. It gives us a reason for stopping to take a look at where we are, what we are, where we want to go, what we want to be, and what it will take to get there.

The start of a new year is also a time for memorializing people and events - the ten biggest stories, the ten top newsmakers, the ten best movies, or tv shows.... Most of the time, what or who is memorialized is taken only from the past year. Rarely are long-term accomplishments, that span a number of years, recognized.

When cumulative, or long-term accomplishments are recognized, often it is many many years later, only as the person being recognized is at death's door - or, seemingly nearly as often, after the person is no longer living. The most recent example of the tendency to recognize people only belatedly was reported just this past week. According to an article in the <I>Saipan Tribune</I>, movie actor Gregory Peck, at age 82, was recognized for roles he played as long ago as 1947 and 1962. Peck was to receive the Marian Anderson award - a tribute to artists whose leadership benefits humanity - for the personal and professional courage he showed in taking a public stand against anti-Semitism and racism in the films "Gentleman's Agreement" and "To Kill a Mockingbird."

That's not to say that Peck is necessarily at death's door - I'm not a film buff, and thus am not up on such things. But it does seem having to wait 36 years in once case and 51 years in the other for recognition is a bit excessive.

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Such delayed recognition doesn't happen only elsewhere. There are any number of people here in the CNMI who deserve, but have not yet received, recognition for long-term accomplishments.

One that comes immediately to mind is Donna J. Cruz, who's served as Governor's Secretary from the earliest days of the Commonwealth's existence. Just holding down such a sensitive, highly-placed position through the administration of five successive governors is itself an accomplishment that no other government employee has achieved. But Donna's "claim to fame" goes far beyond that. She has an incredible memory, and an even more impressive filing system. Her ability to retrieve documents, facts, data, almost immediately is phenomenal. Her discretion, her ability to protect and preserve confidentiality, her firm adherence to high ethical standards is no less phenomenal.

Donna did once, I believe, receive an employee of the year award. But that's not the same. She's much more than "employee of the year." She's more like the Commonwealth's "corporate" memory. Her accomplishments, her abilities, her no-nonsense even-handed treatment of all who cross her path deserve recognition on a broader scale, on a different dimension. And it shouldn't wait until thirty years from now. It should be given now while she is in a position to appreciate, enjoy and bask in the admiration and respect she so richly deserves.

There are other candidates. Gloria Hunter is one. Juan M. Diaz is another who comes readily to mind. There are no doubt others. Long-term government employees who've successfully served in difficult, sensitive positions, who've carried out their responsibilities with consummate skill, who, like Donna, are outstanding models of the ideal public servant - and living testimony that not all government employees are either corrupt or corruptible.

The Second Con-Con called for an Indigenous Hall of Fame, which has never materialized, perhaps because it was too limited a concept. How about, instead, a Commonwealth Hall of Fame, dedicated to honoring - in their (early!) lifetime - outstanding servants of the Commonwealth, regardless of their degree of indigenouness?

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Ammeseighil Ráágh! Biba Ano Nuevo! Manigong Bagong Taon! Happy New Year!