

On My Mind

1/22/99

Well, the latest round of Covenant 902 talks is over, and "the feds" have returned to Washington.

Apparently, the CNMI team's original agenda received short shrift - there was no mention, in either side's closing statements, of a waiver for CIP matching fund requirements, of claims to submerged lands, of economic aid in light of the CNMI's current economic problems, or of non-voting delegate status for the Washington rep.

Yet both the official position of the CNMI team and comments from individual members reflected a positive outlook. Their unanimous verdict seemed to be that the talks were friendly, frank, and fruitful.

Though no doubt Ed Cohen, the President's rep to the 902 talks, deserves much of the credit for the NMI's positive attitude - Cohen was described as open, receptive and responsive - considerable credit for the CNMI's accommodating reaction must also be given the special karma of non-confrontation espoused by CNMI Governor Pedro P. Tenorio.

While the talks resulted in no major breakthrough or concessions, the fact that they were held at all, and, moreover, that the atmosphere was both positive and friendly, should of itself be considered a major accomplishment. The 902 talks had been suspended by the previous CNMI governor, in the most acrimonious of terms.

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Though Cohen acknowledged that island economies pose unique constraints, he nevertheless insisted that this did not warrant exception to mainland U.S. immigration and minimum wage policies. This would, in fact, appear to be the crux of the matter: to what extent mainland immigration and minimum wage law and policy are - or should be - applicable to a small island economy.

The U.S. apparently believes that as a matter of principle, mainland immigration and minimum wage law and policy should be made applicable to the CNMI. The CNMI is arguing that as a matter of practicality, that doesn't work here. Unfortunately, the U.S. is the Goliath in this debate. On the other hand, it is not inconceivable that the CNMI could, eventually, prevail.

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I asked, in last week's column, whether the CNMI shouldn't be taking another look at re-cycling as it gets ready to finally open its new landfill. I had not realized that, in fact, the CNMI - or one CNMI agency - is already doing that.

The CNMI's Division of Environmental Quality has asked the Legislature to pass laws in support of re-cycling. Prime targets, according to a recent story in the <I>Marianas Variety</I>, would be paper and textiles remnants. Though the article focussed on re-cycling "plants," there are

other ways to re-cycle both of those materials. Shredded paper, for example, could be used as packing material without having to be treated in any way. Cloth strips could be woven into rugs, pot holders, door mats, chair seats; made into dolls, doll clothes or patchwork quilts; repackaged as polishing and cleaning cloths, and put to a myriad of other uses limited only by one's imagination.

Re-cycling local textile remnants could become a significant "cottage" industry - with people unwilling or unable to leave their homes - such as mothers of young children, or the man'amko - doing the work at home. With some entrepreneurial spirit, their products could then be sold as a cooperative venture or, perhaps, marketed to larger retail outlets.

At a time when jobs are short, and income is falling, a closer look at the opportunities offered by re-cycling might be well worth pursuing.

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Last week's column also made mention of the inaccuracies one finds in print media. Though it should come as no surprise, that's not the only place inaccuracies occur. A wonderful example is the class action suit just filed against local garment manufacturers on behalf of some 25,000 foreign workers.

Among the charges is that every one of those 25,000 workers lives in quarters that are crowded, unclean, pest-infested, and do not meet building safety standards. That, of course, is patently untrue. At least those quarters visible from the road don't match that description. And given that inaccuracy, how many others does that suit contain?

It's tempting to issue the warning: beware the printed word!

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However, if the printed word is to be believed at least some of the time, it is heartening to read that Tinian's leaders are taking steps to protect their environment before it is destroyed by too many tourists or other non-residents. Tinian's Senator Herman M. Manglona has introduced a series of local bills that would set aside a conservation area and protect wildlife and vegetation within that area, that would create a marine reserve, and that would prohibit use of scuba tanks while fishing in the Tinian lagoon and nearby waters.

Would that Saipan had done the same!

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Meanwhile, the Clinton melodrama continues, with a decision due as early as next week, perhaps, on whether witnesses should be called to testify. It is difficult to believe that the calling

of witnesses will do anything other than make the proceedings more demeaning, more tawdry, more salacious, not to mention more drawn-out. But that witnesses will add new information is highly doubtful. So what's the point? Hasn't everyone, from tv commentator, host, or guest, and print columnist, analyst, or editorialist, to Starr himself, members of Congress and the public at large, already heard, read and chewed on who said and did what to whom, when and where?

Of course, if Clinton's defense team is successful in arguing that Clinton indeed is not guilty of the charges being brought against him, it would look far better for Clinton than an outcome that says, "yes, he did those things - or, he may have done those things - but they are not impeachable offenses." However, given the militancy of the prosecution team and all they represent, taking that chance is, in my opinion, quite a big risk.

Being left disenfranchised, a voiceless, impotent by-stander in such a critical affair is almost more than I can bear.

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It doesn't help at all to read that one of the Senators sitting in judgment on Clinton has been quoted as saying, as he planned to appear for a tv interview, "Being impartial, which is the oath we took, doesn't mean not having an opinion." The quote is from Senator Charles Schumer, D-NY, as quoted in this past week's <I>Saipan Tribune</I>.

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Arguably the best reporter that the CNMI has had of late has left the vicinity, this time apparently for good. Nick Legaspi, former editor of the <I>Pacific Star</I>, more recently KCNM news gatherer and on-line columnist, reportedly left island on New Year's eve, headed back for Manila.

He's left island more than once, vowing never to return - most dramatically when, some years ago, he left the <I>Variety</I> unannounced, leaving behind a letter full of bitterness and frustration, and a car parked at the airport. But this time, it seems to be final. He's set up a print shop back home, sold his print shop here, and turned in the company car. Regrettably, as on previous occasions, he did not give friends an opportunity to say good-bye, to wish him well.

I am biased when it comes to Nick - he was always supportive of my efforts, he gave me space in his paper for my column, he went out of his way to accommodate my sometimes tardy contributions.

Somewhat shy and unassuming, he was, nonetheless, a highly knowledgeable and discerning reporter, an excellent writer, and a discreet and trustworthy confidant. He, clarified conflicting stories, uncovered stories others hadn't found, made complex stories understandable. He will be missed.