

On My Mind  
2/5/99

I've always thought that the practice of dismissing experienced and capable government officials simply because they belonged to the wrong party was not only a shame, but also counterproductive. A shame because it caused a perfectly good administrator to lose his or her job for no other reason than being of or for the party out of power, and counterproductive because it meant having to bring a new person up to speed in that job, as well as causing a loss of "institutional history."  
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As I understand it, the enactment of civil service was supposed to correct that, allowing government employees to keep their jobs regardless of what party won the last election, was in power. And up to a point, I guess it does. But former governor Froilan Tenorio's infamous executive order gave the governor the power to appoint division chiefs as well as department heads, which extended party politics further down into the ranks and took away those positions' civil service protection.  
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But even legitimate patronage, if that is not an oxymoron, should take into consideration the individual, and not dismiss an employee solely on the basis of party affiliation.  
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Blind adherence to party loyalty, however, isn't just a local phenomenon. This same blind adherence to party loyalty is driving the smear campaign against President Clinton in Washington, D.C. It doesn't matter what the issue is, or how much logic or support there is, or is not, in the many proposals that have been put before the Congress to finish the soap opera, to get it over with, to leave the parties involved with some shred of dignity, to return to the business of running the country. Until this week, the members of Congress have responded as though they were robots who knew only one thing: how to follow party lines.  
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The party line vote allowed the release of Starr's investigation reports, the decision to bring impeachment proceedings to the floor of the House, publication of the grand jury testimony. The party line vote ruled out censure before trial (which now would appear to have been quite fortunate!), and brought about the hearing of witnesses by the Senate. It's difficult to imagine just what it is that keeps the members of Congress so tied to their party, but it's pretty disturbing to realize that despite public opinion, despite the best legal opinion, despite plain ordinary common sense, Republican party members have not strayed one centimeter from the party line.  
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Inexplicably, it has finally, in the last stages of the farce the impeachment trial has become, begun to crumble. Thank goodness, the vote on whether to call witnesses did not follow party lines.  
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Nevertheless, the abuse of party loyalty has, I would suggest, gone too far. Not being either an historian or a political scientist, I don't know that there are alternatives that are any less prone to abuse. At the very least, sanity, reasonableness, freedom of thought, must be restored to the two-party system if it is to survive as an acceptable means of government.  
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More emphasis should be given to justice and objectivity, to need and fairness, to the bigger

picture. More flexibility should be tolerated to allow party members to vote their conscience. Most of all, more attention should be paid to the voters who put the politicians in their place to being with.

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And in the matter of "patronage," more concern should be given to quality of performance, to the impact on the efficacy of government as a whole; more respect shown the character and capability of the individual incumbent when personnel changes are considered. There are those in the community who do understand the difference between politics and job performance, who are capable of making that distinction, whose specialized knowledge and skills are much too valuable to government as a whole to be sacrificed on the altar of party loyalty.

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Party affiliation is a convenience, a convention. It should be flexible and comfortable. It should not be the rigid, restrictive, inflexible straitjacket adopted by Congressional party leaders, or, to a lesser extent, by local party leaders.

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In his stance against the so-called garment "attrition" legislation, House Speaker Diego T. Benavente stands out in sharp and blessed contrast to CNMI's weaker politicians who have all apparently succumbed to the Tan party line. The bill - on its way to the Governor - would allow the hiring of anywhere from 600 to 2400 additional garment workers to meet the needs of yet another garment factory. Benavente strongly opposes the bill, arguing that it will not only further strain the CNMI infrastructure, but is sure to aggravate relations with the Federal government, already unhappy about the large number of foreign workers in the CNMI.

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The Speaker has also spoken out against the uncalled-for, inappropriate, and presumptuous interference by members of the House and Senate in the on-going bid process for CUC's new power plant. Despite the hiring of an independent contractor to re-evaluate the bids that had been submitted, House and Senate utility committee chairs are urging passage of a bill to award the bid without waiting for the results of the re-evaluation.

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It is good to know that there is at least one political leader on Capitol Hill who has the strength of character to withstand party politics, the ability to focus on justice and objectivity, on need and fairness, on the bigger picture, and the willingness to speak out on the issues.

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Would that there were more!

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David Cing's contention that the CNMI needs an independent counsel may have some justification, but after watching Kenneth Starr's performance as an independent counsel, it might behoove us all to be very careful about establishing such an office here.

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Liberty House did it again. Ran a big ad in the Friday <I>PDN</I> featuring sales on all sorts of things - for that day only. Sometimes the ad is run in the Friday paper for a sale on Saturday. That may be all very well for Guam residents, but it sure makes it hard for CNMI residents who may want to take advantage of such sales.

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There's a rumor that Liberty House on Guam may close its doors. That would indeed be a pity. But not all that surprising. The CNMI may not offer all that many extra customers, but if the store doesn't even know - or care - enough to try to accommodate potential customers from neighboring islands, what can one say?

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I really liked Zaldy Dandan's column in last Friday's <I>Variety</I>, "Get <I>Really</I> Real." Zaldy comments on the students' "protest" regarding the lack of scholarship money, reminding them, as well as the rest of the community, that the present scholarship program is more of a giveaway program, and that it is high time the CNMI - and NMC - "restore the real meaning of 'scholarship.'" Well said, Zaldy!

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I really don't like the <I>Variety</I>'s practice of putting the continuation for all its stories on just a few pages all bunched up toward the end of the paper. There one is confronted with as many as eleven items on two facing pages, each identified by only a one-word heading. Just looking at it, trying to sort out which one completes the story I started reading on pages 1, 2, or 3 gives me a headache. I know it's easier to lay out that way, but it certainly isn't easier on the reader!

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And I wish the <I>Variety</I> would run its masthead in EVERY issue of the paper - including its web site. It gets frustrating to have to search for the phone number, to make a phone call to find the e-mail address, just to contact the paper.

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And while I'm carping, I thought it a pretty astounding admission that "the governor has permitted only 298 exemptions under the freeze hiring law since it was ... signed by Tenorio into law last year," reported by the <I>Variety</I> in last Friday's issue. ONLY 298, indeed!