

On My Mind
2/12/99

As I write this, the final vote on President Clinton's impeachment has not yet been taken, but the outcome is already clear: the impeachment effort has failed, and Clinton will have been found not guilty of impeachable offenses. It would appear, in fact, that not even a majority - 50% - of the Senate believed Clinton's misdeeds impeachable.

Interestingly enough, moreover, it also appears that there will not even be a Senate vote of censure. It is not clear to me why the Republicans, so bent on impeaching Clinton to begin with, would now balk at censuring him. It is barely comprehensible to me that Clinton's own party members - the Democratic Senators - are the ones pushing for censure. It has been explained that these Democratic Senators want to be able to go back to their constituencies and tell them: See? I did register my objection to Clinton's behavior, even though I didn't, and don't, think it constituted an impeachable offense. Ain't politics wonderful?

So it is virtually over. But at what a price! As is true of so much litigation nowadays, the only real winners were the lawyers. Clinton may be said to have won, since he was exonerated, but the embarrassment, the pressure and the strain on him, on Hillary, on Chelsea, on their relations with each other, will continue to plague them for years to come. Though it is my understanding that Clinton's attorney bills will be paid with private (as opposed to public) funds, this is not true, so far as I know, of the attorney bills incurred by the House and Senate. Those will be paid by us, the taxpayers, one way or another - as, come to think of it, will those submitted by Kenneth Starr.

In addition to purely monetary considerations, there is also the matter of the time that has been taken up with this affair. Since September of last year, when Starr's report was submitted to Congress, much of Congress's time has been devoted to dealing with its aftermath - from House Committee deliberations on whether or not to impeach and on the content of impeachment, to the involvement of the entire Senate in the impeachment trial itself. Hundreds, if not thousands, of hours that should have, and could have, been spent on meaningful national issues - from the education of our children and the health of our senior citizens to financial security for us all - were, instead, spent on a shameless, wasteful, useless witch hunt.

Unless deliberate effort is undertaken to re-establish limits to the invasion of privacy - even for public figures - the entire game of politics will also suffer greatly. What kind of person is so free of past indiscretions that he/she could withstand the ruthlessness of a headline-hungry press? Knowing that even minor peccadillos from decades earlier would be dug up and broadcast to the nation at large, who would ever want to run for office? The very traits that distinguish capable leaders - creativity, boldness, intelligence, charisma - are the ones most prone to lead to divergence from the straight and narrow.

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A less depressing outcome of the whole thing is the coinage of a new word: compartmentali-

zation - that ability of President Clinton to put away in one compartment - and completely ignore - all the unpleasantness of impeachment, while continuing to operate in a separate compartment - with considerable aplomb - as a world leader and president of his country.

Of course, we probably all practice compartmentalization on a smaller scale. We hide, or ignore, or cover up some problem or other and go blithely on as though it never existed. What makes Clinton's performance so unique is that it was all done in the public eye. Everyone knew what was being ignored.

It is a not unenviable skill. But it requires an immense amount of will-power, resolve, determination. Which Clinton obviously has.

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The not-mentioned irony of it all, though, goes back to that decision by the Supreme Court in the Paula Jones case that a sitting president can be sued. If the Supreme Court had said a sitting president could not be sued, Pandora's Box would never have been opened.

I wonder if that haunts any of the Justices involved in that ruling? It would certainly haunt me!

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Speaking of a willingness to run for office, Juanita Mendiola, in her latest issue of WITTY Magazine Chamorro, has a long article about the detrimental effect of elections on the people of Tinian, and on Tinian's community growth and development.

The article gives details of the pressures that a candidate running for office puts on family, relatives and friends, challenging their loyalty to family, their self-respect, in his/her efforts to gain their support. This creates tension and dissension within the family unit.

Campaigning, which airs private information as well as gossip, generates hostility and, sometimes, retribution, among candidates.

A desire for power persuades political hopefuls to reject House membership for the more prestigious status of Senator, resulting in a lack of continuity or committee seniority in the House, to Tinian's detriment.

The solution, says the article, is in strengthening party discipline, and in defining clear party philosophies and goals. Not only would this focus interest on issues, rather than individuals, but it would weed out self-seeking politicians, since the party would be expected to weed out candidates who did not support party goals.

It is a well-argued and thought-provoking article. Moreover, everything in it applies equally

well to Saipan, and would, I expect, to Rota as well.

Where would such reform start? Logically, with party leaders. But that is probably too idealistic. Pressure by island voters directly upon party leaders, urging the leaders to "clean up their act" - for the good of all the people of the CNMI - would probably be more effective.

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The CNMI's leaders are busy gathering data to present to Congressman Young and his entourage next week in support of the CNMI's contention that foreign workers are necessary to the CNMI economy, that the foreign workers are not mistreated, and that changing the status of the foreign workers or their salaries would have a disastrous effect on the already weak CNMI economy.

Hard data is good ammunition - but everyone knows that statistics can be manipulated to show anything anyone wants to show.

CNMI leaders should, therefore, also expend some effort gathering ammunition of a more philosophical nature. The underlying argument that federal officials are using in insisting that the federal government take over immigration and minimum wage in the CNMI is that the CNMI's approach is inconsistent with basic American values. The case needs to be made that there are some "basic American values" that simply can not be applied here.

For example - the so-called basic American value of freedom to go from job to job may work just fine in a large geographic area with millions of people, such as the continental United States. But it doesn't work nearly as well in a tiny island with a relatively tiny population and a limited economic base. Minimum wage might work fine in a large area with untold natural resources and investment opportunities, but it doesn't work nearly so well in a confined area with a minimum of either natural resources or investment opportunities. An emphasis on private sector development and smaller government bureaucracies might work well in one large contiguous area, but it doesn't work well in a population fragmented over a number of small islands that require costly duplication of basic government services.

Other restraints unique to the CNMI that affect the wholesale applicability of American values: an isolated geographic location in terms of major market areas, and the ever-present potential for destructive island-wide climatic conditions. (My thanks to Bill Stewart for the list of unique restraints, which he spelled out in his column in yesterday's <I>Variety</I>).

The CNMI needs to be able to argue principle as well as fact.