

On My Mind

4/16/99

Last Friday's <I>Variety</I> contained one of the best pieces of reporting I've seen in a long, long, time. Entitled "Kosovo for beginners," the article explained in clear, precise and easy-to-understand language just who the peoples of Kosovo are, how the conflict there started, who is on which side, and why. Without bias, and without any emotional rhetoric, the article puts the war in Kosovo in context, providing essential background information that the national news stories all seem to assume we already know. Well, I didn't, and Zaldy Dandan's story was just what I needed to even begin to understand what is at stake there. Well done, Zaldy!

Thank-you!

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In contrast, I take exception to local news stories that have been reporting that approval of C.I.P funds is all that prevents start-up of construction of a new prison. WRONG. There is not yet even a planner on board for design of a new facility, much less have plans been drawn up for the prison complex. There is not even agreement, yet, on just what a new facility will contain, what "philosophy" of criminal justice it will be used to administer.

The role of federal officials and federal agencies in the CNMI has been much maligned, but in this case, at least, it's fortunate that money for the new prison facility is federal. Perhaps with federal oversight, there will be not only time and opportunity for community discussion and advice from experts on the options and alternatives available but also actual incorporation/accommodation of such input in the final design of a new facility for the CNMI.

The point made by Greg Miles, former consultant to the Department of Corrections, in his recent letter to the editor bears repeating: Many of the inmates at the Department of Corrections are local, and will once again become our neighbors when they are released. The prison facility should be so designed that when those inmates are released, they will be good neighbors.

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Perhaps it's more a matter of our remoteness, or through which medium one follows the news, but

the print media's treatment of the independent counsel issue certainly seems skewed to me. According to the stories in the papers, the main argument against continuation of the position of independent counsel is the "length and cost of recent independent counsel investigations," to quote a Reuters news release.

While that is a significant factor, shouldn't the effectiveness of the independent counsel position be even more important? Whether or not anything was accomplished by the spending of all that time and money? Whether or not what was accomplished, if anything, was worth the expenditure of all that time and money?

Presumably this is being discussed somewhere - in professional publications, in commentary on the radio, on tv, news magazines. But it hasn't filtered down to the local papers, even though all of them carry items produced by the national newswire services.

The moral of the story is: If you want complete or accurate information, never rely on the local newspapers as your only source.

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Not only could the CNMI government use the help of public relations firms to lobby politicians in Washington, D.C. on its behalf, but the Marianas Visitors Authority would also appear to need the help of a public relations firm to "lobby" potential tourists on the CNMI's behalf.

For example, "Visit the Marianas in '99" seems an odd slogan to broadcast from power poles in Saipan. Whoever reads them already IS in the Marianas. Not only that, but the flags are fading fast - for all that was involved in designing them, getting them printed, getting them hung, looks like they won't even make it through half the year.

Then there's the MVA's month-long chef's cook-off, or whatever it's going to be called, that is due to start in two weeks. The only publicity so far has been the framework for the utt-like structures that have gone up in Memorial Park - and have been wrongly identified by the

<I>Saipan Tribune</I> as belonging to the Flame Tree Festival.

The MVA-sponsored "world's largest dive" is scheduled to take place tomorrow. Can one take a boat out and watch? What time is it scheduled to occur? How does one participate? What's the latest on how many divers will take part? Will participants receive any memento of their participation? I haven't yet seen today's papers, but even if they contain the answers, isn't it a little late?

As any successful advertiser knows - and public relations is, after all, just another form of advertising - it's exposure that counts, and the more exposure, the better.

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Speaking of exposure, maybe it's time to recall what advertising research discovered some time ago. After a while, the study showed, it didn't matter whether a product got bad reviews, or got good ones. Consumers bought it anyway - based solely on the name recognition. If that still holds true, eventually, the CNMI's bad press regarding alleged labor abuses will stand it in good stead. Potential investors, developers, visitors, will recall only the name of the CNMI - as something they're already familiar with - without the negative connotations.

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The seemingly unending flow of un-visa'd Chinese seeking entry into Guam is more than a little troubling, unsettling. Not only does it suddenly bring the reality of China a lot closer to the Marianas, but it also highlights just how vulnerable the borders of these islands are. Now there are reports of Chinese refugees, if you will, reaching the shores of Australia. It doesn't seem to speak very well for the quality of life in China - or at least that part of China from which these boat people are coming.

It's only natural to wonder whether, if the federal government were to take over immigration in the CNMI, the CNMI would then also be subject to hundreds of unvisa'd Chinese landing on its shores.