

On My Mind  
by Ruth L. Tighe

PCBs in Tanapag. Will the problem never go away? Now it's been discovered that soil in and surrounding the cemetery contains an unsafe level of PCBs. Somehow, that seems to have escaped the notice of the endless stream of surveyors, engineers, contamination measurers, soil testers, and other military and civilian experts, specialists, contractors until now - some fifty years after the contamination is alleged to have occurred.

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The neighboring site, across from Kim Enterprises, has now been completely stripped of any trace of the decontamination work that had been done there. Contractors to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers have removed all of the equipment that had been used to "cook" the contaminated soil from other areas in the vicinity. Contaminated soil that was not yet "cooked" has been bagged and loaded into containers, ready for shipment off-island. The piles of tires and empty soil pans have also been loaded into containers and taken away. A hole was dug, and other piles of soil, apparently not as contaminated as that that was removed, were pushed into the hole, which was then re-filled. The fence surrounding the site was taken down.

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But now there's new fence up, around the cemetery. As a FUDS (formerly used defense site), clean up is the responsibility of the U.S. government - specifically the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (ACE). But according to Ignacio V. Cabrera, head of CNMI's Division of Environmental Quality, that may not happen right away. Some of the funds for the clean-up were siphoned off to take care of the mustard gas canisters recently discovered on Guam.

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It is depressing, to put it mildly, to think that at the same time that new sites are found where the soil still hasn't been cleaned up from poison put there some fifty years ago, contamination of land continues, around the world. In and around Kosovo, for example, people are being taught how to detect land mines, and children allowed to play only in restricted areas, because there isn't enough manpower to dig up all the mines that were put down by the Serbians in just the last six months. Though most countries have pledged to stop the use of land mines, the U.S. - and, apparently, the Serbs - have not.

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Such contamination - and, yes, I also consider land mines a contamination of the soil - creates two problems: the first is the long-lasting residual effect, and the second is the cost of clean-up. You'd think people would know better, by now, than to continue creating such hazards, but apparently they still don't. A real tragedy.

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It's also troublesome that information of concern to local residents is so slow in being given to them. A public meeting for the purpose of informing residents about the new contamination found in the Tanapag cemetery is not scheduled until sometime during the first two weeks of September. In the meantime, there's only the fence, and warning signs about PCB contamination.

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The responsibility for the delay does not lie entirely with DEQ. Since it is a problem created by the federal government, and the clean-up is a federal responsibility, federal officials will no doubt be at the public meeting. Thus, a meeting cannot be scheduled without coordination with federal officials.

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Nonetheless, it does not seem to me unreasonable to expect that somehow Tanapag residents be given information of such import much more promptly. Which, in turn, raises another dilemma: the lack of a formal means for doing so. There is no such thing as a village-level mechanism for giving out information - except through the church, and perhaps the coconut wireless.

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There are no reporters assigned to village "beats." There is no "village news" page in the papers, no village news segment on either radio or tv news. There is no village official who can be tasked with giving information to "his" residents. Even village meetings, when it comes to that, are not a very efficient means of getting information out to village residents. Yet there are times when it would be convenient, to say the least, to be able to do so.

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Does the answer lie with re-introducing the idea of village commissioners? Only if the position could be maintained as a non-political one. Whether that's possible in the CNMI is open to question!

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I'd like to add to the accolade that was given "Tan Ko" Palacios in last week's <I>Tribune</I>. I knew him through my stint as editor of the now-defunct <I>Marianas Review</I> in the late '80's. There isn't much one can rely on - either in general, or in putting out a paper. A source doesn't call back. A promised fax doesn't arrive. A reporter is late. A meeting gets cancelled. The promised press release never appears.

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But I could always rely on Frank Palacios. Week after week, if there was a game played, there was a report from Frank. He always made the deadline. On the rare occasion when he himself could not make it, he made sure a report was still forthcoming. His stories were the one thing we could always depend on in laying out the paper, in allocating space.

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His accounts were full, fair, accurate, and detailed. He described the special plays, singled out the special players. He wrote in a somewhat breathless style that read like live, on-site reporting. You could almost see the action. He brought in statistics, written out in a meticulous hand.

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I did not know him well, but I grew to respect him greatly for the outstanding reporter that he was and continues to be to this day.

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Having written just recently on the evils of consumerism, so to speak, I was taken aback to see the headline in the <I>Tribune's</I> Thursday issue: "Keeping the world safe by consuming."

The author, Walter Russell Mead, is identified as a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, and apparently wrote the article as a special for the <I>Los Angeles Times</I>.  
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The economic theory gets a little involved, having to do with balance of payments, the U.S. trade deficit, Europe's growth, Asia's recovery and the possible effect of a weakening U.S. dollar.  
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But as I understand it, the gist of Mead's article is that world economies depend on the purchasing power of Americans, and that the way to keep the struggling economies of other countries afloat, is for the people of the U.S. to continue to purchase goods produced at least in part in those other countries.  
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The article concludes: "...U.S. consumers should spend boldly to keep the world economy on the march."  
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That may work as an economic theory, but it does not work as an environmentally-responsible, ecological one. The earth's resources are not inexhaustible, and continued consumption without regard to conservation will lead to a disaster much more long-ranging in its effect than the economic slowdown that could occur if consumption is not controlled.  
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Perhaps Mead's ivory tower has constricted his vision?  
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Maybe the CNMI should make it a rule that visiting Congressmen not be allowed entry unless they stay for more than 24 hours? The level of Senator Thomas R. Harkins' understanding is a case in point. As reported in a story covering his brief visit, "he finds it odd that the Commonwealth is being allowed to enforce its own labor and immigration laws while neighboring Guam is not."  
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That's a pretty scary comment, and one would hate to see the Senator leave the CNMI with that impression. Especially since the explanation is fairly simple and straightforward: it's provided for in the CNMI Covenant, which established a relationship to the U.S. different from the one Guam has.  
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But if that's too much to absorb in a stay as short as Harkins' was, maybe the CNMI shouldn't permit such fly-by visits at all.