

On My Mind  
by Ruth L. Tighe

In this day and age, when "nickel" candy bars cost more than fifty cents, and a nickel cup of coffee costs over a dollar, the sum of fifteen cents seems a mere pittance, almost not worth counting, much less arguing about. There's not much that fifteen cents can buy, anymore. Which makes the protests against the fifteen cent "tax" that the local legislature voted to impose on the rental of video tapes and the price of movie admissions for the benefit of island youth difficult to understand. Much less sympathize with.

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Even if one rented 10 video cassettes a week, the total "tax" would only come to \$1.50 - the cost of a cup of coffee. That people are objecting to contributing the price of a cup of coffee towards the construction of athletic facilities for island youth just doesn't make a lot of sense, doesn't seem the least bit reasonable.

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Maybe people are so afraid of anything resembling a direct sales tax that they are objecting on principle - concerned that if one tax is put in place others will follow? But that doesn't make a lot of sense either. People are already paying all sorts of taxes - on gas, on cosmetics, on cigarettes, on beer and liquor, on cars and trucks, poker winnings....At least with the video tape/movie tax, people know where the money is going, what it will be used for, and that it is for a good cause. Most other taxes go into the general fund, to be distributed as politics dictate.

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Let's hope the politicians who promise they'll have the tax repealed are not, this time, any more sincere than they apparently were when they promised to amend the retirement vesting law to grandfather in government employees caught in a bind by the unexpected extension of the minimum vesting period.

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I don't know what - if anything - in the way of hand-outs, press releases, information packets, the CNMI delegation to the U.S. Congressional hearings took with it to distribute to the press, members of Congress, government officials, and anyone else who might be interested. There should, for example, have been a "fact sheet" - rebutting item for item, the misinformation disseminated through that deplorable 20/20 show, disseminated through stories by other misinformed and uninformed reporters that have appeared in the nation's news media, disseminated through equally uninformed talk show hosts and guests.

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It is aggravating, and frustrating, for example, to read in a Gannett News Service story that the "CNMI government has managed to keep the mostly Democratic reformers in Washington at bay by spending millions of dollars on powerful lobby firms." As though the CNMI still has those powerful lobby firms on its payroll. As though the CNMI's accomplishments over the last two years in labor and immigration reform have been merely the result of positive spin manufactured by paid lobbyists, rather than actual fact.

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There should also, it seems to me, have been a brief, bright and colorful pamphlet that makes it

clear not only that the CNMI is a very young entity - one that has not yet reached 25 years of age - but also stressing its unique political relationship with the U.S. It should emphasize that the CNMI is not like some unheeding state, or rebellious - or even apathetic - territory, but a vibrant, albeit still struggling, developing domain which needs help far more than it needs reining in.

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It isn't too late to provide such information, if it wasn't done. It can - and should - be put together and sent out as "follow-up" information. Even if all of the above has been said before, audiences do change, and it often takes repetition for learning to be absorbed.

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The CNMI should not limit its efforts to addressing Congress. It should, as well, make an effort to directly combat the misinterpretations perpetrated by mainland media. Millions of dollars, and big powerful lobby firms help, but even on a more modest scale, well-designed counter-statements can have an effect.

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Readers have offered some ingenious solutions to my recent problem with UPS mail delivery. One suggested I use my post office box number as a house number, and the post office location - in my case - Capitol Hill - as the name of the street. Another suggested using the box number as suite number - giving the address a certain flair - and, with legislative cooperation, assigning to the post office an arbitrary street name and "house" number.

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On the other hand, apparently UPS, FedEx, and the like, don't deliver to U.S. Post Offices. And their rates are very high in any case. Coming via UPS, my parcel would have cost about four times as much as I was charged to have it sent priority mail, I was told. Guess I should be grateful the company I ordered from was willing to take my order to the post office!

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I think it's called "passive-aggressive behavior" - when one uses inaction, doing nothing, to solve a problem. Members of the legislature seem pretty good at that - making, on various occasion, all sorts of promises to one constituent group or another in order to look good - and then doing nothing about it because they don't really believe in, or want to take, the action they've promised.

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Such passive-aggressive behavior can be quite convenient, but when two different constituent groups ask for opposite actions, it can get rather difficult. Take, for example, the 30% early retirement bonus that the legislature enacted in a mad moment of false economy. Millions of dollars were supposed to be saved by enticing government employees to retire early. But as the law was written, as it is being interpreted, almost anyone can qualify for that 30% bonus upon retirement - early or not.

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In today's economy, shelling out such large amounts of money as employees leave government is becoming more and more difficult, as agency budgets are cut even in the face of rising operational costs. The 30% bonus has become an extravagance the CNMI can no longer afford.

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Prudence would dictate that the legislators repeal the provision - removing the burden from government and its agencies to fund such an excess. A repeal would make budget balancing considerably easier. And, indeed, there is talk of doing so. But this is an election year. And there are few government employees who would willingly give up a promised 30% bonus.

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Can there be much doubt as to the outcome?

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Rumor has it that the new movie theater will have its grand opening this evening. Perhaps that information has been available via tv and/or radio, but it hasn't appeared in the newspapers. For those who aren't movie addicts, the very modest ads have been a major disappointment. There's no clue as to what the movies are about, or who's starring in which picture, or why one would want to go see any one of them to begin with.

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This week-end also sees the presentation of the play "Steel Magnolias," put on by the Friends of the Arts, tonight and Saturday at 7:30 p.m. with a Sunday matinee at 3:30 p.m at Marianas High School.

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The Carolinians will be celebrating the 29<sup>th</sup> annual commemoration of Chief Aghurubw on Managaha on Saturday - boat transfers to the island will be offered at 8:00 and 9:30 a.m., with return trips at 3:00 and 4:30 p.m.

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At the Arts Council, there is a most impressive show of striking Micronesian and Pacific crafts, which is open daily from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. and from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. on Saturdays.

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There is a conclave of attorneys, with a dinner this evening and a workshop tomorrow slated at the Hyatt.

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The Museum is featuring a photographic exhibit of the Chamorros of Yap. The Museum is open seven days a week - from 1:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. on Sundays and from 9:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Saturday.

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Such a wealth of special offerings, all on the same week-end, is pretty amazing.