

On My Mind
12/10/99

Rumor - that wonderful coconut wireless - has it that two U.S. Congressional staffers are on island lobbying for Benigno Fitial's selection as Speaker of the House. If Fitial is not chosen, say the rumors, the staffers are "promising" almost certain Congressional approval of federal takeover of immigration and imposition of the federal minimum wage in the CNMI. The connection between Uncle Willie and Congress? That the bill for the lobbying efforts of that infamous Preston Gates PR firm are now being footed by Uncle Willie, and that the Congressman whose staff are on island is close friends with Preston Gates. Uncle Willie has asked a favor, and Preston Gates, through his friendship with the Congressman, is responding. Or so the rumor has it.

A variation of that rumor goes that it is a substantial contribution from Uncle Willy to the Congressman that has, as a favor to Willie, brought the staffers out here to lobby for his man in our legislature. Which might be the more plausible rumor, given that one would think that Preston Gates, son of the richest man in the world, would hardly be swayed by what Uncle Willy could offer. Aren't rumors fun?

At any rate, members of the U.S. Congress got upset at efforts by Department of Interior staff to interfere in Congress' dealings with the CNMI. Will its members get equally upset at alleged efforts by staff of one of their own members - presumably with the knowledge and approval of the Congressman himself - to interfere with something so internal to the CNMI as the selection of Speaker of its House of Representatives?

The U.S. Congress is not in session, which may make getting the attention of appropriate Congressmen more difficult, but surely such brazen federal interference in the internal affairs of the CNMI as has been alleged will not go unnoticed and unremarked? Only by raising a public "hue and cry," by publicly embarrassing everyone from Uncle Willie and Preston Gates to Fitial, the Congressman and his two staff members, can this outrageous blackmail attempt - assuming, of course, that it is true - be overcome.

The leadership of the CNMI House of Representatives has already designated Congressman Heinz S. Hofschneider as the next Speaker. Their decision should be respected, and honored. Moreover Hofschneider, among his other strengths, has integrity.

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The hearing on Congressman Hofschneider's bill to establish a marine sanctuary around the island of Managaha, House Bill 11-40, gave evidence not only of Hofschneider's dedication to the well-being of the CNMI, but also evidence of an encouraging maturity in both the people of the CNMI and its legislators. Every government representatives who testified, as well as every member of the public who spoke at the hearing, supported the bill.

There appeared to be - at least at that hearing that night - unanimous support for the sanctuary by

fishermen, government leaders and business people, all recognizing that fish stocks have been depleted over the years, and that the only way to replenish them was to provide protected breeding habitats. In fact, some of those who testified proposed that the area of the sanctuary be extended even farther than defined in the bill. Some also proposed that there be no exception to the no-fishing ban called for in the bill - not even for seasonal runs of atulai, i'i, tiao and manahak, as the bill had proposed.

Moreover, two of the three legislators in attendance were co-called "lame-duck" legislators, having lost their bid for re-election. Yet both Congressman Manny A. Tenorio, who conducted the hearing as Chairman of the Natural Resources Committee, and Congressman Melvin O. Faisao remained present throughout the entire session, in addition to Hofschneider, author of the bill.

Despite all the support, chances of the bill's making it into law during this session do not appear promising. Several changes will have to be made in the bill as a result of the hearing, the bill would then have to be approved by both the House and the Senate and then by the Governor - all before the end of the session. That calls for a miracle we are not likely to see, unfortunately. It's frustrating to think the whole process will have to begin all over when the next legislature comes into session.

The other "down" side to the hearing was the difficulty in hearing at all. Words got jumbled and slurred, others got swallowed up, and the microphones only made the situation worse. The effort to hear, to understand what was being said, was a strain, wore me out, drove away at least one reporter. The acoustics at the multi-purpose center have been a disaster from the beginning - which is a pity. The location is good, but until the problem is fixed, its utility is limited.

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The reaction to failure of NASA's latest attempt to conquer outer space - the loss of the Mars probe - leaves me speechless. Millions of dollars lost for the second time in just three months on what is a speculative venture at best - with no explanation for the loss - and people just shrug their shoulders, while NASA plans yet another probe a few months from now. There are so many other, better things, that could be done with that money!

It may be true that the U.S. economy is strong and healthy, but that doesn't mean money should be thrown away. NASA, however, isn't the only one throwing money away. Newspapers have reported, in recent weeks, research that proved without a doubt that second hand smoke endangers the health of those exposed to it. Research that showed that sunlight improves students' abilities to learn (when there are already clinics, even, to provide sunlight to the depressed). Research announcing there was now proof that a healthy life style leads to living longer. That there are valid grounds to complaints of neurological damage by Desert Storm veterans.

Aren't those findings just plain common sense? Was it really necessary to spend millions of dollars to prove them? I don't think so.

Where is the sense of priorities? Why is so much money being thrown away on such arcane projects? Why isn't there, for example, research on why people fight, why people are willing to support the military, why people are willing to go to war - why people are willing to tolerate the slaughter and starvation of others? Why people continue to ravage the environment? Why isn't there money spent on teaching people how to arbitrate, negotiate, tolerate, understand, live together? What good is a lander on Mars when we can't stop a seventh-grader from getting hold of a gun, and shooting his classmates?

Mankind has not yet learned to live in harmony in the world at hand. Shouldn't that come first, before the risk is run of polluting and ruining another world out there?

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Or are we humans destined to always be flawed creatures?