

On My Mind

1/7/00

Obscene. As in "offensive to accepted standards of decency." Is there any better word to describe the machinations of the unholy trio that is trying so hard to disrupt the normal, routine, civilized way the CNMI House of Representatives usually does business?

Not only is the trio trying to unseat the already-agreed-upon heir to the Speakership, not only is it trying to split the Republican party, not only is it setting colleague against colleague, but perhaps most obscene of all, it has publically and maliciously attempted to snub, humiliate, and insult two of the most popular elected officials of the Republican Party.

The calling of a press conference, no less, to announce the new "coalition" of House members backing Benigno M. Fitial as House Speaker has a feeling about it that seems almost evil. It made sure that all of the members of the coalition, all the signatories to the coalition agreement and to the roster of committee assignments, were put on public record. Anyone who might later want to change his or her mind has now, in effect, been trapped.

Moreover, the proposed coalition would give only five of the nine re-elected members of the House committee assignments. Totally ignored by the coalition would be the knowledge and experience of the other four veteran lawmakers - Speaker Diego T. Benavente, Speaker-elect Heinz S. Hofschneider, and members David M. Apatang and Jesus T. Attao. Their agreement shows that eight members of the coalition would, among them, serve as either chairman or vice chairman of all of the House's eight standing committees. Fitial would take the position of Speaker, and Oscar M. Babauta that of Floor Leader. Vice Speaker Alejo M. Mendiola would, in addition, be assigned as vice-chairman of one committee.

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Adding to the obscenity of it all is the fact that one of the unholy trio behind all these machinations is an outsider. He doesn't live here, he's never lived here, he isn't registered to vote here, and so far as I know, he doesn't have any family or relatives here. But, it is said - and it appears obvious - that he has friends here, and even, so the rumors go, financial interests. As if that weren't bad enough, he is a member of the U.S. Congress.

Just what is a member of the U.S. Congress doing interfering with the internal politics of the CNMI? Sending his staff out to, in effect, bribe members of the House by promises of direct financial support from Congress (and Fitial has freely admitted that two aides to Congressman Tom Delay did indeed meet with Rota representative Alejo M. Mendiola and newly-elected representative from Tinian Norman S. Palacios)? Particularly when the CNMI is not a U.S. possession, is not under the control of the U.S. Congress - as is Washington, D.C. - but is a member of the U.S. family via a Covenant that in some cases allows the CNMI more freedom than the states?

Though perhaps hypocritical (or greedy, or duplicitous), rather than obscene, is the better word to

use in regard to those CNMI legislators now so docilely feeding at the trough of the U.S. Congress despite their many protestations in the past that Congress has no right to interfere in matters internal to the CNMI.....

Well, as has been said in another setting, "it ain't over til it's over."

Monday's inauguration should be quite a show.

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Monday, in addition to being inauguration day, is also Commonwealth Day. Another one of those "C" day holidays, with no explanation provided of why it is celebrated and no known ceremony scheduled - other than the inauguration, which may well turn out to be more like a three-ring circus....

And once again, until today, at least, there has been nothing in the papers in regard to either event. This "C" day, Commonwealth Day, commemorates the date - set by proclamation by former president Jimmy Carter - on which the CNMI's Constitution was to come into full force and effect, in 1978.

Let us hope the inauguration does not make a mockery of the day - or the Constitution.

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This past Monday, another potentially portentous day, passed more quietly than had been expected. As the headlines put it, the Y2K turnover was a non-event, at least so far as computer problems were concerned. Question: will anyone ever know whether it was all the money spent on prevention that made it a non-event, or whether it would have been a non-event anyway?

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One of the things that fell through the cracks - what with global pre-occupation with potential Y2K problems and local preoccupation with things like the House speakership and this year's still unpassed budget - is coverage of local entrepreneur Tony Pellegrino's latest brainstorm: a water-sports barge in the middle of the lagoon.

What Pellegrino is proposing is an anchored floating complex that will provide an enclosed area for water bumper cars, another for swimming, water play and a water slide, and deck areas for sunning and for service of food and beverages (though no alcohol). The complex will also rent out kyaks, water craft and other equipment, and offer para-sailing.

The complex, which is projected to consist of a passenger barge, mothership and service vessel, will cover an area of 22,576 square feet, with a perimeter measurement of 775 linear feet. All of the barge's operations will be self-contained. According to a brochure distributed at last month's public hearing on the project, "The project does not require dredging, discharge of dredged fill

material, the processing of seawater by reverse osmosis or discharges of RO brine or byproduct, discharge of wastewater, and [sic] the discharge of other solid or liquid waste.”

The barge would be anchored by 10 mooring block anchors of 9 cubic feet or less each. The proposed site would be located .83 miles east northeast of Managaha, .5 miles south of the barrier reef, .72 miles north of #10 buoy, .5 miles north of Tanapag harbor, and 1.5 miles north of Outer Cove Marina. According to presentations made at the hearing, the site has a sandy bottom with neither corals nor sea grass nor “economic fish species” present. Depth at the site is said to be about 11 feet.

The project is expected to serve 149 passengers at any given time, and to provide 20 or more jobs for local residents. According to Pellegrino, the idea came to him from seeing something similar in operation in Hawaii.

Proponents admit that the project will compete with “watercraft activities” in other areas. They also acknowledge that water quality in the area will be affected by turbidity and “incidental release of small incremental quantities of fuel.” In addition, the project may present “modest potential risk of accident or minor fuel spillage.” But, they claim, the potential for adverse environmental impact “is considered to be negligible.” The effect on fish, on rays - which like sandy bottoms- on the lagoon habitat in general - is not so clear. Nor is it clear whether the lagoon is large enough to carry so much activity in that area.

And I still can’t picture just exactly where it is relative to Tanapag’s shorefront.

With the hearing held on December 15, there’s still a week left for people to submit comments, express any concerns they may have, to the CRM, to which Pellegrino has applied for a permit for the venture.