

## On My Mind

1/21/00

The U.S.S. Blue Ridge, flagship of the U.S. Seventh Fleet, was in Saipan for a four-day port visit over last week-end. I don't know how many of the ship's 900 officers and crew were ashore at any one time, but they sure were all over the place! Everywhere I went, there they were: on the road in rental motorbikes or getting sunburned in open convertibles, wandering through the grocery stores, running along the beach path, looking over the Duty Free offerings, in line at ATMs, eating in the restaurants. No doubt they were also in a lot of places I didn't go.

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No sooner did the Blue Ridge leave, than the U.S.S. Mobile Bay took its place, with not quite as large a crew, but still, making its presence felt on island in the same way. The increase in sales brought about by the visit of the two ships must have made quite a number of merchants happy, particularly in light of the CNMI's continuing sluggish economy.

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The Navy ships bring in the same kind of business that cruise ships would - one that benefits the economy without stressing or draining the infrastructure. With sleeping quarters on board the ship, there is no demand on the island's local water supply, the island's local power supply, the sewer system. There is no demand on the school system, only occasional demand on the police department, nearly none on the health care system. There is no need for more hotel rooms.

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And yet money is spent on island, spread out among a broad variety of businesses, from taxi cabs to car and scooter rentals, from restaurants to grocery stores, from gift shops to banks, and presumably from para-sailing and scuba diving to boonie stomping guides - with the ripple effect providing increased income to gas stations and farmers and sales clerks and bakers and wait-staff and the like as well.

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Servicing Navy ships - even if the CNMI is offered only as an R&R site - has not, so far as I know, been seriously considered, been much of a priority, in the CNMI's search for alternate sources of revenue. Yet, as these past two weeks should have made clear, the potential - made easier by the Port's expanded capacity - is there.

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If such visits were to become a regularly scheduled activity, it could be a boon even to the amateur music and theater groups on island. They could schedule their performances for when the ships were in port, thus bringing in larger audiences - provided, of course, information about the events reached ship crews in time. In fact, any number of "peripheral" benefits could also be realized. All it would take is some imagination.

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It would be interesting, of course, to know more precisely just how much of a difference the visit of the ships actually made. The question is, was anyone keeping count? Is this something the MVA can be charged with pursuing? Or should the Chamber of Commerce be asked to do so?

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It's nice to know the feds can do something right for the CNMI - at least once in a while. The

decision - just released by the U.S. Supreme Court - to uphold the Covenant provision for equal representation in the Senate for the CNMI's three major islands is gratifying and reassuring. (Technically, the Covenant provides that the CNMI Constitution will provide equal representation for each of the chartered municipalities of the NMI in one house of the legislature.) The possible effect of any other interpretation by the U.S. Supreme Court was almost too distressing to even think about.

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The ruling came in response to a suit filed by Ted Mitchell on behalf of Stanley Torres and Jean Rayphand, who argued that the composition of the CNMI Senate violated the U.S. Constitution's one-man-one-vote provision. One should, perhaps, be grateful to all three for bringing up the issue, so that it could be addressed and resolved on such a definitive level.

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The decision by the Supreme Court also adds credence to the validity of the Covenant itself, an always useful advantage given the attitude of some government officials toward its provisions and its status.

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One should, perhaps, also be grateful to the CNMI Legislature and the Governor for finally passing a law to abolish the 30% bonus that retiring government employees have been able to collect since the provision was enacted in 1993.

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However, the law will not go into effect until government employees hired after December 15, 1999 are eligible for retirement - in most cases, some 20 years from now. Until then, the government is condemned to continue paying out that exorbitant 30% bonus, and the drain on government resources will continue. All because the original law, granting the bonus, was not written carefully enough.

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It's frustrating how poorly not only some laws, but also some news stories, are written. The on-going saga of that little six-year-old Cuban boy, caught in a political struggle between the U.S. and Cuba, is a good example. At first I thought he should be allowed to stay in the U.S. - isn't that what his mother wanted for him, and died trying to accomplish? But then came the story that the parents were estranged, and that the mother practically kidnapped the child. Which made me think the child should be returned to the father. But now some are saying that the father is being used as a front by Castro, and may not really be all that interested in his son's return.

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But it's all innuendo, interpretation, suggestion, speculation. There don't seem to be very many hard facts upon which to make a judgment, come to a conclusion. Not revealed in the stories are answers to simple questions such as: was the boy living with his father? what was the relationship between the parents? how did the mother manage to get the boy on the boat? did the father not know? what kind of a father is/was he? what role did the alleged boyfriend of the mother play?

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Nor has there been all that much discussion about the issue of what is more important in reaching a decision: easy access to American glitz or a father's love for a child? And who should make that decision?

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Even the coverage of the legal games being played by both sides is confusing. How can Janet Reno's finding that U.S. immigration law requires the return of the child be cast aside? Who's paying for all the legal work for the boy's stateside relatives?

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The whole media frenzy is unseemly, upsetting, disturbing..... Poor child! Poor father! Poor family of the mother, whose mourning has been all but ignored!

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Speaking of missing information, the stories about hotel occupancy rates just released by the CNMI hotel association leave out one important component: what is the typical, average, hotel occupancy rate of hotels elsewhere - in Hawaii, or in Fiji, or on the U.S. mainland? How do the CNMI's rates compare with the rest of the world? Is that 80%+ rate the CNMI hotels enjoyed for a while typical? Or is the lower rate more typical of hotels elsewhere - and are CNMI hotel owners expectations unrealistic? Such statistics need to be seen in perspective to be fully understood.