

On My Mind

2/28/00

It made front page headlines in both papers, but that was about it. There was no follow-up, there were no details. Just a one-liner. The <I>Variety</I> headline said, "CNMI Legislature's vehicle expenditures increase 126%." The <I>Tribune</I> headline said, "Legislature posts 126 percent hike in vehicle procurement." Information on how many vehicles that represents, how many went to the Senate vs the House, how many leased vehicles were involved, was not provided.

Former Speaker Benavente did give a story to the papers about the advantages of leasing rather than purchasing cars for use by legislators, but that didn't really answer the question of why the Legislature's expenditure in that category went up last year while most other agencies' expenditures went down.

Given that every other agency listed in the story reduced its use of vehicles during fiscal 1999, given the decrease in available revenues, given the cuts to agency budgets imposed by the legislature, surely the legislature's flagrant extravagance, its blatant misuse of government funds, deserves more attention than a line or two in a headlined story. Who's covering up for whom, here?

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The <I>Tribune</I> did a follow-up story on travel expenses in government over the past year, reporting that once again it was the Legislature whose expenditures seemed most out of line. But a closer reading of the story presented some rather confusing statistics, rather than elaborating on the matter. We called the Department of Finance, which allegedly issued the report on which the newspaper story was based, for clarification. But the spokesman there said the Department of Finance had issued no such report.

The Department did, after the <I>Tribune</I> story came out, give the paper information on those expenditures and asked that the <I>Tribune</I> print them. Look for it in Monday's issue.

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In the "What's wrong with American values" corner is a so-called side bar in <I>TIME Asia</I> Magazine's November 29, 1999 issue. The side bar appears in a major article on Jiang Zemin, president of China, and offers advice to the president on how he could improve his image, make himself more widely known to the rest of the world. The advice makes just five points: Jiang should avoid wearing silly hats like the colonial three-cornered hat he apparently recently tried on in public; he should get a new tailor and order solid gray or blue pin-stripe suits instead of brown ones - and not wear thick-soled shoes; he should write a book (making sure to get an expert ghost writer); he should visit a hair salon and not comb his hair in public; and he should change the "fashion-challenged" style of eyeglasses he wears.

Would <I>Time Magazine</I> really have us believe that those are the things that matter in achieving recognition as a world leader? That the facts that Jiang remains president of a country of 1.3 billion people, that he has been in power for ten years, that he was instrumental in getting China accepted into the World Trade Organization - don't count, aren't important, should not be considered?

What a pathetic commentary - on <I>Time Magazine</I>, on its perception of what matters to the world at large. And how presumptuous of an America-based magazine to attempt to tell an Asian leader how to go about charming the masses!

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Typically, one looks to the private sector to do things better than they are done in the public sector. But one big private sector organization certainly goofed earlier this week, and the consequences made the front page of both local papers. Sending out only a single warning notice, Micronesian Telecommunications Corporation (MTC) cut phone service to customers who had not made their payment by a newly-imposed due date.

M.T.C. wanted to tighten up its procedures for getting customers to pay on time and to simplify its own internal processes, so it decided to set the same fixed payment due date for all customers, and to strictly enforce the payment deadline. But it did nothing to inform its customers of this change in policy and practice except to mail out disconnection notices to customers whose payments it had not yet received.

Apparently, not everyone received the disconnection notices. Apparently some who did took no action, perhaps not convinced that M.T.C. would really follow through, would really actually disconnect their phones. But M.T.C. did, and as a result, M.T.C. offices were crowded with protesting customers earlier this week, all complaining about the lack of notice.

It seems rather peculiar that M.T.C. - not a new organization to the islands - would be so unaware of the need to make sure its clientele got advanced notice of the change in payment schedule and the enforcement of deadlines. It seems odd that M.T.C. - a communications industry at that - could be so ignorant of effective means - from radio and newspapers notices to billing inserts - for informing the people of the island of the new procedures it was implementing. Has it forgotten that some people only go to the Post Office when they know something has been sent to them?

Guess that's what happens - even in the private sector - when there is no competition.

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It must be rather difficult for a senior government official, who has served as head of a large government agency as well as close advisor to the Governor, to then be labeled as "rookie" Senator. There's quite a difference between being a top administrator and thus responsible for making all the decisions, and being only one of three Senators from Saipan and having to work

with eight other Senate members in order to take action.

Kumoi has wasted no time making a splash on the CUC scene, filing bills, drawing attention to himself in his new role. One would hope that, in the process, he does not compromise the dignity of the office, does not upset the delicate balance that must be maintained in the Senate to allow the three districts to work with each other for the common good.

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Another “bull in the china shop” sort of act was newly-elected House Speaker Fitial’s dismissal of U.S. Department of Interior’s Insular Affairs Director Ferdinand Aranza as a “jerk.” Fitial used the uncomplimentary epithet in response to Aranza’s suggestion that in meetings of an inter-agency task force in Washington to discuss assistance to U.S. “territories,” the issue of proposed federal take-over of immigration and imposition of federal minimum wage in the CNMI be left off the agenda.

According to Aranza, inclusion of these topics could slow down efforts to assist the Commonwealth in getting federal financial assistance. An astute observation, it seems to me, and an indication of a willingness on the part of the Feds to work together, to support CNMI needs in other areas, to not hold the CNMI hostage solely because there are disagreements on the issues of immigration and minimum wage.

Insulting the Insular Affairs Director before the interagency meeting has even been held, before knowing what kinds of assistance are being offered, strikes me as much the same kind of mindless “knee-jerk” reaction the former governor was so well known for. It’s also rather surprising behavior for someone who once gave the impression, had the reputation, for being able to work with everyone.

That, together with Fitial’s imbecilic refusal to talk to <I>Variety</I> reporters, gives rise to the worry that here too, the dignity of the office appears at risk of being compromised.

