

On My Mind

2/18/00

To make sure there is no doubt about it, the <I>Tribune</I>, over the last two weeks, has gone to great lengths to show just whose side it is on. In the seven issues since Washington Rep Juan N. Babauta announced his candidacy as Republican nominee for governor on February 8, the <I>Tribune</I> has run four anti-Babauta editorial cartoons, in addition to three anti-Babauta editorials.

Babauta should feel honored that the <I>Tribune</I> considers him such a threat that it is spending nearly half its editorial space and effort on criticizing him and his office. The problem, of course, is that what is being said is so biased, so derogatory, so unjust. On the other hand, the charges are so outlandish that it is difficult to take them seriously. Anyone with common sense knows better.

Babauta is being criticized, for example, for not attending the recent U.S. Senate sessions at which the infamous "takeover" bill was passed. So where would he sit? With not even status as a non-voting delegate to the U.S. House of Representatives, he could only sit in the gallery, along with the rest of the general public. The CNMI - and Babauta as its representative - have no voice, no vote in the U.S. Senate.

He is being criticized for not meeting more often with Congressional leaders. Without even the status of a non-voting delegate to the House - thanks in large part to the refusal of the CNMI legislature to support such a change of status for the Washington Rep - in what capacity should he do so? He is not a constituent. He is not a colleague. As the CNMI Representative to Washington, he has nothing he can offer members of Congress - neither vote nor support.

Moreover, under the previous administration, he did not even have the backing of the governor. There was not much he could say to members of Congress that he could be sure would be supported back home.

He is being criticized for not "lobbying" Congress to reject the minimum wage bill, the INS "takeover" bill. How is he expected to do so when he doesn't begin to have the resources - the millions of dollars that the Chamber of Commerce and the CNMI Legislature claim should be paid a commercial lobbying firm to do the same thing?

The <I>Tribune</I> isn't doing anyone any favors by mounting so intensive and baseless a campaign. After a while, repetition of such exaggerated rhetoric no longer has an effect; it just becomes boring. And boredom loses readers.

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Actually, it isn't all that clear whose side the <I>Tribune</I> is on in all of this. It has waged an equally intense campaign in support of, rather than opposed to, the new House Speaker. Fitial is a Republican, but so is Babauta. Ordinarily, party loyalty is paramount. Of course, Fitial has

already shown blatant disregard for party lines, party loyalty. Even so, why become so hysterical about the candidacy of a fellow Republican? What is it that makes Babauta so formidable a candidate that such extreme measures are viewed as necessary? Whom IS the <I>Tribune</I> supporting? Pepero, another Republican, who - with suspect haste - has also announced his candidacy as Republican nominee for governor? It would not appear so - not one line of editorial space has been given to his candidacy since it was announced. And if not Pepero?

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Speaking of questions that have no clear answers, here's another: What is behind Fitial's proposal to reverse all the labor "reforms" put in place by the last legislature? He has introduced a bill that would, among other things, lift the moratorium on the employment of foreign workers, lift the cap on the number of garment factory workers as well as the number of garment factories, lift the three-year limit on workers' stay in the CNMI, and repeal the resident workers' fair compensation law.

All of these were put in place in the expectation that doing so would prove to the U.S. Congress that the CNMI was capable of establishing control over its immigration service and its labor market, and that it would deter Congress from going ahead with its plan to impose federal control over both. Yet along comes Fitial, and throws out the whole hard-fought-for package.

Yet it was Fitial, if memory serves me right, who assured voters that if he were elected, he could assure them that Congress' takeover efforts would fail.

What does he know that we don't? Who's side is he on?

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On another front, neither is it clear, from the report in the papers, whether the villain is the U.S. State Department or the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. And while it would be nice if the papers made a greater effort to avoid such confusion, that, at the moment, is not the point. The point is that whatever federal office it is that is in charge, once again there has been a total disregard of the extenuating circumstances that make the CNMI a unique member of the so-called American political family.

At issue is the denial by one or the other of those federal agencies of the request for temporary visas that would allow locally employed Filipino accountants to travel to Guam so that they could take board exams for qualification as Certified Public Accountants. Not even the offer of a bond from Philippine Consul to the CNMI Julia Heidemann, guaranteeing the accountants' return to the CNMI, had any effect.

U.S. visas can only be processed from the place of origin, the Consul was told. That's about as unrealistic a requirement, in this case, as one can get. Require all those locally employed Filipino accountants to travel back to the PI to apply for visas to Guam in order to stay on Guam

for three to four days to take an exam? Could anything be dumber?

Is this the kind of treatment the CNMI can expect if the so-called "takeover" bill now in the U.S. Congress becomes law? If so, heaven help us all!

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It wasn't a heavenly voice, but it was a voice not normally heard when making local phone calls - the one that said, as I was making a local call last week: "All circuits are busy now. Please try your call again later." And then it gave an operator, or a message, number - I can't remember which. This week, I got the message again, when trying to call a different local number.

Of course, I immediately assumed that MTC had failed, somehow - that despite the slowdown in the economy, despite MTC's touted careful planning, Saipan was suffering from a shortage of phone line capacity.

However, a wonderful resource I've carefully cultivated at MTC informed me that I was wrong. The problem is not MTC's. The recorded message occurs when a customer's trunk line, which connects the customer's PBX, or private branch exchange, to MTC becomes overloaded. The capacity of the customer's trunk line is determined by the customer.

What I find peculiar about the whole thing is that the only way the customer finds out that his or her trunk line is overloaded is if the person who gets the recorded message about all circuits being busy, complains to whomever the person was trying to call.

Whom was I trying to call? The Superior Court, last week. Saipan Datacom's modem connection, this week.

To others who may get that recorded message: let whomever you're trying to call know that his/her trunk line is overloaded. It seems to be the only way they'll ever find out.