

On My Mind  
10/20/00

It's both appalling and frightening to watch the latest example of what greed can do. One high government official after another is being bought off, and duly makes statements to the media about how safe shooting resorts will be in the CNMI. Even those without a direct role in the operation of such resorts are issuing public statements of support.

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There can be no other reason for their mealy-mouthed assurances that, having witnessed Korea's strict controls, of course the CNMI is capable of doing the very same thing - exercise the strictest of controls over the weapons and ammunition used in shooting resorts.

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The evidence points the other way. Enforcement of the regulations covering the use and possession of weapons and ammunition will be given to the CNMI Department of Public Safety.

While there are many within DPS who are conscientious and hard-working, the fact remains that the performance record of the organization as a whole is considerably flawed. One need only look at all the un-solved burglaries, robberies and thefts, all the un-solved homicides, to realize that the DPS is not your most effective, efficient protector of the people.

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It is inevitable that there will be "leaks" of both guns and ammunition into the hands of people neither authorized nor qualified to handle such lethal weapons. It is equally inevitable that these illegal lethal weapons will be used in the commission of crimes, and will result in serious injuries and fatal shootings.

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It is folly to rely on an organization as weak as the DPS to guard and protect the lives of CNMI's residents and tourists alike from such murder and mayhem.

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Yet ordinarily sensible people are saying that they see no problem. Only greed can explain such irrational behavior.

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In the private sector, interestingly enough, there doesn't seem to be as much evidence of pay-off. The Hotel Association of the Northern Mariana Islands (HANMI), for instance, has publicly voiced its opposition to amendment of the Weapons Control Act to allow for the so-called "shooting resorts."

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HANMI's position, based on a poll of its eighteen members, is that Japanese tourists - the largest segment of the CNMI's tourist population - dislike guns in general, and place great emphasis on safety. The existence of shooting resorts in the CNMI would only turn Japanese tourists away, according to HANMI members.

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Yet the government agency responsible for tourism activity in the CNMI supports the establishment of shooting resorts. Will be interesting to see whose point of view prevails.

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Isn't it said somewhere that the law is the servant of the people? Lately, to judge from the stories in the press, it would seem that the law is more the opposite - the law is not servant, but more like intractable master, hammering people into the ground. Since the beginning of August, when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers contractor, Environmental Chemical Corps (ECC), began working to remove pcb-contaminated soil from the Tanapag cemetery, an alliance of sorts has developed among the parties involved. Now the CNMI Attorney General's Office, in an overzealous attempt to enforce the letter of the law, is demanding that members of that alliance face off against each other.

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Members of the alliance are the Army Corps of Engineers (ACE), its contractor ECC, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the CNMI Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), the U.S. Coast Guard Strike Team, and the villagers. While EPA has made demands of the ACE, and the villagers have made demands of both, ECC - with ACE concurrence - has done its best to be accommodating, while DEQ has taken on the role of liaison, support, and facilitator.

It has been a workable, cooperative, flexible, and friendly process, with productive results. The cemetery was opened for funerals even prior to the promised date for its re-opening in time for All Soul's Day, it was re-opened on schedule, and preliminary steps toward excavation of village sites have begun.

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At issue, according to the Attorney General's Office, are interpretations of applicable law, as well as the question of how literally a law must be interpreted. While lawyers make their living by disagreeing about interpretations of the law - indeed, such disagreements support the entire judicial system - it is not always in the best interests of the parties involved to force a literal adherence to the letter of the law.

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With few exceptions, the "alliance" was working to the satisfaction of all involved. It would be a pity if legal machinations were allowed to disrupt the process.

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Despite government attempts to negotiate, barter or otherwise weasel out of paying the entirety of its overdue utility bill to CUC, government still hasn't taken the most obvious step towards reducing its obligation to CUC. It's very simple: turn up the thermostat in government offices.

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The temperature in most government offices is way below the comfort level. Everyone wears long-sleeved shirts, sweaters, jackets, dresses - attire that is not required for any other occasion on island. Imagine living on a tropical island - and having to purchase long-sleeved attire in order to be warm enough to function without shivering, without blowing on one's fingers, without hugging one's self to keep warm.

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If all government offices brought their temperature up to a point where long-sleeved attire were no longer necessary, the savings in utility bills would be substantial. (Is it paranoid to wonder if CNMI's garment factories - who manufacture suits and sweaters, among other things - have

anything to do with the refusal of government to turn up its thermostats?)

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Admittedly, turning up the thermostat won't reduce past debts to CUC, but it could sure go a long way in reducing future obligations.

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The family of Dr. Chris Ebert-Santos moved to the mainland a year ago, keeping a promise to son Carlos, that if he kept up his grades, the family would move to the mainland so that Robert could continue playing high school football. They moved before Carlos' sophomore year.

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About a month ago, Carlos, now a junior, suffered an injury on the field which resulted in a broken neck. At first, he could not move. At a press conference a few days after surgery to repair his fourth and fifth cervical vertebrae and a displaced cervical disk, Carlos said he was able to move his arms. But doctors were still not sure of the long-term prognosis.

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The family hoped Carlos would be transferred to Denver's highly regarded Craig Hospital to begin rehabilitation. "The doctors have said that rehab could take three months," Carlos said in the interview. "That's the New Year. I know that I'll have to take it one day at a time, but that's the goal right now - to be back home for the New Year."

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Those interested in donating towards Carlos' care should contact Betty Johnson at CHC, or Attorney Ben Salas.

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Though given to both local newspapers, neither chose to publish the story. Hence it's appearance here. Dr. Ebert-Santos is well-known and highly regarded; she was a member of the staff of the Commonwealth Health Center for many years.