

On My Mind  
12/22/00

Well, at least the presidential election has now been settled. But the beat does seem to still go on, from the observation made by Norman Lockman even before the Supreme Court's ruling came down that the Court had "tipped its hand" as to which way it was headed when it stopped the vote count but didn't stop the clock (he's associate editor of *The Wilmington News Journal*, whose column occasionally appears in the *Pacific Daily News*) to this observation sent to me by my oldest: "In 1555, Nostradamus wrote: 'Come the millennium, month 12,/ In the home of greatest power,/ The village idiot will come forth/ To be acclaimed the leader.'"

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And because the election battle was such a rare occurrence, was so controversial, and had such enormous consequences, it is clear that that 'beat will go on' for a considerable time to come - grist for doctoral dissertations as well as light-hearted doggerel, for endless in-depth analyses as well as countless novels, for stand-up comics as well as sit-down movies and tv series.

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We should probably all record our memories of what happened when, before the reality becomes warped by special interests who will color the facts to suit their own ends - as history is so often re-written after the fact.

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The *Tribune's* editor has assembled some pretty persuasive arguments as to why the CNMI government should support professional lobbyist Jack Abramoff - to the tune of more than half a million dollars - to look after CNMI interests in Congress even if he leaves the Preston Gates firm - as is rumored in Washington that he might..

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What no one seems willing to answer is why that money should be paid to someone else when there is already a legitimate office in Washington D.C. with the express purpose of representing the interests of the CNMI in Congress, and indeed, throughout the federal government. It doesn't take much of a stretch of the imagination to picture what the Washington Rep's office could do with that half-a-million dollars.....

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All that cost that is written off to over-head, for example, in any outside contract, would not be an expense to the Rep's office, since it is already established, and budgeted for. All the money for hacks and gophers that Abramoff would use could be cut in half, since the Washington Office already has a staff in place. Money to conduct all the research that would have to be done on current conditions in the CNMI could be eliminated, because the Washington Office already has that information, and has first-hand knowledge of where to go for what it lacks. All the money for trips to the CNMI to observe the "client" first hand could be eliminated, since that knowledge, too, the Washington Office already has.

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Cutting the Washington Office budget to fund someone else to lobby on behalf of the CNMI just makes no sense at all.

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Well, well, well. The Marianas Visitor's Authority finally did something right. It found an independent, knowledgeable and capable marketing firm to evaluate MVA's efforts to promote tourism among the Japanese. The firm, KK Creative Assist, said, among other things, that MVA's use of the panda as a "mascot" for CNMI tourism wasn't very relevant. Pandas' native habitat is China, rather than Japan, for one, and in addition, pandas are totally irrelevant to the CNMI.

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Of course, others have said the same thing, but maybe this time MVA will listen.....

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The marketing firm also pointed out that the MVA should develop a long-range tourism plan - as should any self-respecting commercial enterprise. It said that, before implementation, the MVA should discuss any market plan that it developed with the industry people involved and affected, another common-sense and standard strategy any self-respecting enterprise would have adopted long since. Another area of long-range planning the firm identified as missing: a conservation management plan that would, among other things, deal with the garbage problem.

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The most significant recommendation made by the firm is that the CNMI should take steps to differentiate its appeal from that of Guam's. As Guam moves to become a "mini-Hawaii," the CNMI should not attempt to compete with either Guam and Hawaii, but set itself off as a different, a more natural and un-spoiled destination, focusing on the beauty of its natural resources instead of urbanizing as well.

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This approach is echoed in the recommendation that if the CNMI pursues the so-called wedding market, it should again try to be distinctive, rather than copying other destinations, and promote, for example, more nature-friendly weddings on the beach.

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If, as the KK Creative Assist report implies, the MVA has not had a long-range plan up til now, if it has not included industry people in designing its marketing plans, if it has not given thought to distinguishing the CNMI from Guam and Hawaii, it makes one wonder just what the MVA has been doing all these years.

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The big question is, will MVA heed the advice it has been given?

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If so, perhaps MVA will recall and re-write the two RFP's it issued recently for help in developing and implementing advertising campaigns. The need is not to find a better sales pitch. The need is to develop a better product. The money spent on advertising would be better spent on funding activities for the tourist - from an exhibition hall/cultural center, the promotion of cultural dance and drama and rainy-day activities to some variation in places to shop. DFS shoppes in every hotel lobby just don't cut it.....

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A good product often practically sells itself.....

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Christmas is upon us. In that spirit, I would encourage all who are able to visit the Christmas displays constructed by various schools on Saipan, which can be seen at the Afetna Center in San Antonio. The creative and ingenious use made of coconut flowers, banana flowers, tangen-tangen seed pods and flame tree seed pods, coconuts and coconut tree husks, bamboo, banana tree stumps, star apples, local tangerines, egg plant, and bananas, (and I'm sure I missed some at that) is just amazing.

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The only disagreement I'd have with the judges, who gave first prize to the Mt. Carmel display, second prize to Garapan Elementary School and third prize to Koblerville Elementary School, is that I'd have given DanDan Elementary School more than just a consolation prize. Though rather stark and modern - which is precisely its appeal, in my opinion - I would at least have given it an honorable mention for its grace and simplicity.

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Now if some enterprising entrepreneur could only find a way to turn those school students' creativity with the island's indigenous products towards creating more beautiful and appropriate CNMI gifts and souvenirs than the ugly, commercial, artificial gizmos offered to tourists in the DFS shops and everywhere else on island, what a wonderful Christmas gift that would be to all of us!

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Merry Christmas! Felis Pasgua! Ammeseighil Ubwutiwel Layu'l Luugh! Maligyang Pasko!