

## On My Mind

3/2/01

Jumping to conclusions can be hazardous to one's health. Not to mention leave one looking foolish. But the tendency to do so seems very strong: people do it all the time. The problem is that sometimes, getting at the facts that would reduce those risks can be rather tedious.

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Many people are upset, for example, at what appears to be the tawdry behavior of the Clintons in taking so many items from the White House when they left. Though it would certainly seem to be inappropriate behavior, it is unfair to judge the Clintons without comparing their behavior with that of other out-going presidents. Yet to dig out the information on what other out-going presidents took with them - if anything - ain't so easy!

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The same is true of the pardons former President Clinton granted, some of which would appear to have been ill-judged. But again, it is unfair to judge him without comparing his behavior with that of other out-going presidents. And again, to dig out the information - not only on the pros and cons of the pardons he did grant, and the bases on which the choices were made, but also on pardons other out-going presidents granted, would take a lot of work.

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Closer to home, it is to be hoped that the conclusion - jumped to by a District 4 Congressman - that Tanapag residents should be re-located because of the PCB contamination in the village, has now been laid to rest with the receipt of more data given to him directly at this week's public meeting in the village. In that case, though, obtaining the information to reduce the risk of reaching the wrong conclusion would not have been all that difficult.

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Perhaps it would be appropriate, here, to bring up the hasty conclusions that many reach upon reading stories in their e-mail about such things as HIV-contaminated needles sticking up through theater cushions, or exploding cups of hot water in the microwave, or mis-diagnoses of exotic illnesses. People jump to the conclusion that they must be true, because there it is, in writing. And then they clutter up everyone else's mail box by forwarding the story to all their friends.

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The truth of the matter is that most such stories are not true at all. And the good news is that it really doesn't take all that much digging to find the information that proves they aren't true.

There are a number of sites on the web that de-bunk such stories, which have become known as "urban legends." The one I find easiest to use is <http://www.snopes.com>. The site even lets me send an e-mail back to the person who sent me the "urban legend" to begin with.

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All of us on the net - except those who think perpetuating such stories is somehow funny - would benefit if people who received such "urban legends" would check with the snopes site before crowding the net with copies forwarded to everyone else.

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Another faulty conclusion that many have reached is that all that is necessary to reduce the number of foreign workers in the CNMI - if not to eliminate them entirely - is to provide proper education and training to local workers. Operating on that assumption, legislators have written into law the requirement that employers must not only hire local workers, but also provide them with training, as well as putting pressure on NMC to include needed skills training in its curriculum.

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Here again, the search for truth isn't all that arduous. There are approximately 20,000 foreign workers employed on island. However, there just are NOT 20,000 locals not now working, eligible for employment, or under-employed, to fill those 20,000 slots. It is as simple as that.

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All the rhetoric about foreign workers depriving local workers of jobs and/or of income, of foreign workers becoming too numerous, of the need to bow to pressure from members of the U.S. Congress is just that - empty rhetoric. The fact remains that the CNMI lacks the warm bodies - professional or "blue collar" - to replace those thousands of foreign workers who keep the economy afloat.

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A misconception of a similar sort is the apparent assumption by numerous people - including some government officials - that the same test used to identify PCB contamination can be used to test for any number of other possible contaminants. Tanapag residents, having been told that PCB levels in the village (with one or two exceptions) - and in their blood - are not high enough to pose a threat to their health, are now demanding that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers test village areas for other contaminants. And they're asking that those tests be done as part of the same work project now underway to clean up the PCB contamination.

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But to test for other contaminants would require that the other contaminants be identified. Each contaminant has its own characteristics. A test for PCBs, for example, will not reveal levels of mercury, or lead, just as a test for mercury or lead will not reveal levels of PCBs. The Army Corps and EPA are already aware of the contamination from the fuel farms. If the villagers suspect other contaminants are present in their village, they'll have to identify just what they are, and where they might be, before any meaningful testing can take place.

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Their requests that the present project be expanded to include the testing for other contaminants fails on other grounds as well. As anyone who has worked with contract budgets knows, expenditure of those budgets is pretty well restricted to tasks identified in the contract. Most such budgets are not all that flexible. So any change in tasks that requires the expenditure of additional funds can usually not be undertaken.

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Testing for other contaminants - should any be specifically identified - will have to come from a different pocket in a different budget.

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A quote from the New York Times worth pondering, "The single greatest threat to the institu-

tional success of the United Nations is its use by people for theater rather than for conflict resolution....One of the great tasks of the next administration is to try to prevent the U.N. from being used for propaganda purposes.”

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The same could be said for many other forums, be they political, professional, educational, or public. The greatest threat to the success of any forum is its use by people for theater rather than its intended purpose. A local example that comes to mind: one of the early public meetings in Tanapag between residents and federal officials, where the intent was to provide information to the villagers about the PCB cleanup that was about to get underway. Instead, a large part of the meeting was taken up by the politicians present, each and every one of whom felt it incumbent upon themselves to use the meeting as a campaign platform.

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Much has been written, in the aftermath of last week's shooting that killed three people and wounded four more at the SDA clinic in Guam, about domestic violence, and the need to provide assistance and protection to its victims. Very little, on the other hand, has been said about the equally critical need to control the weapons involved. Peter Maguadog had not one, but two guns at his disposal. Yet he had not only been treated at the Guam mental health department as a result of a previous incident, but had been ordered by the court to stay away from his estranged wife.

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Where did those guns come from? Even if they were legally his, why, under the circumstances, was he still being allowed to carry them?

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Those in the CNMI who would support the establishment of shooting galleries in the CNMI - and Rota's Mayor in particular - should take note. Gun abuse - if one can call it that - can be lethal.