

## On My Mind

5/5/01

With the recent deaths of nine Japanese - due in large part to the presence of civilians on board a U.S. Navy submarine - still in the news, the knowledge that a civilian is on board the international space station and will stay there for a full week is enough to give one nightmares.

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Never mind the \$20 million Dennis Tito paid for the privilege. There's a lot more than that at stake if something goes wrong - not only the lives of every one of the astronauts presently aboard the space station, but also the billions of dollars that have gone into the space station's construction, being put in orbit, and continued operation. Is there some sort of inter-service rivalry here - that NASA doesn't see U.S. Navy operations as in any way related, or pertinent?

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The U.S. might better have paid Russia the \$20 million dollars that apparently led that country to accept Tito as passenger, rather than take such a risk. All may go well, but the odds just don't seem to be in favor.

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If ever there was doubt that governance of the University of Guam is highly and thoroughly politicized, the manner in which the <I>Pacific Daily News</I> handled the letter sent by erstwhile UoG presidential candidate Peter Lee provides incontrovertible proof. Lee sent a letter, addressed to UoG students, faculty and staff in which, among other things, he describes the factors that led to his withdrawal from consideration as the next president of the university.

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Though the <I>PDN</I> offers the full text of Lee's letter on its web site, in reporting the story in its hard copy version, the paper makes but the briefest mention of those reasons. Thus, unless one has access to the web, AND takes the time to call the letter up on the computer, Lee's blunt and disquieting account of his treatment at the hands of the UoG selection committee will never come to light.

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For example: "On several occasions, after terms had been reached, the rules and time lines changed. Most troubling, these negotiations were not confidential.... I was appalled to see such a private matter as the terms of my professional contract stated publicly in the KUAM website and made the issue of a public opinion poll. These reported contract terms were not correct but the Board of Regents made no move to deny the press report and to protect the confidentiality of the process. The high drama and the public nature of this entire process has caused me a great deal of embarrassment."

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In his letter, Lee also expresses his appreciation for those who supported his candidacy, takes note of the enthusiasm and commitment to UoG he encountered, and praises "the many good things happening at UoG right now." This, the <I>PDN</I> article does reflect. But as for providing any meaningful details as to what really led to Lee's withdrawal, the <I>PDN</I> is protectively silent.

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Under the circumstances, the chances of any other outsider even applying for the position, much less being accepted, would appear practically non-existent. Too bad. Because all too often (to take a reader's comment out of context), an outsider with nothing to gain and no relatives to deal with just might be able to make a dent and get others enthused toward doing the right things far easier than an insider.

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Guam's governor has fallen right into line, denying that political interference was involved in Lee's rejection of the position. The only "interference," he said in his weekly radio address, was the suit by Guam's Attorney General, which the governor defended, saying that what was really at issue was accountability of the UoG's Board of Regents. He made no reference to the lack of privacy given to proposed contract terms, which Lee's letter cited as a major problem.

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Interestingly enough the UoG Board of Regents has now vowed to observe a "Code of Conduct" in order to avoid future breaches of confidentiality. That was not mentioned in the <I>PDN</I> either, but in the <I>Marianas Variety</I>.

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Lee said, in closing his letter, "When you lose, don't lose the lesson...." In this instance, at least, UoG's Board of Regents seems to be trying to take his advice.

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All of which goes to prove that it just isn't safe to rely on what the local papers choose to publish.

As this column unfortunately did just last week, in its treatment of that consultant to the anti-prostitution task force. It turns out that he served not with the Marines, but was once an Air Force pilot; that he is not new to the CNMI but had worked here for several years first with the FBI and later for the AG's office (so the "sole source" contract wasn't all that unreasonable); and that what were reported as his proposals were, instead, merely suggestions thrown out for discussion purposes. My apologies.

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The papers commit errors of omission as well. No reporter has, apparently, been the least curious about the circus tents, ferris wheel and other rides that are slowly taking shape across from the Horiguchi building. To those who might want to know: the group is from Samoa, and expects to be opening "MagicLand" on May 15. It is bringing in no animals, but will have acrobats and other performers, I was told.

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Other than improving the lot of the reporters, so they'll have the time and training (and incentive?) to write more accurate news stories and be more inclusive in their coverage, the most practical alternative that comes to mind is to provide the press with data sheets, or news releases - pre-digesting the information, as it were - thus not only saving the time of the reporters but also ensuring that all relevant points are accurately covered. Some agencies have public information officers that do this. More should.

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After having been kept awake, again, long after midnight on a week night, no less, by the noise of a neighborhood party (I will not call it music - it was too thumpy, too unmelodic, too repetitive), I'd like to register an appeal for help. Whom is it up to, to control such noise? What guidelines does a resident have, for complaining? What limits, restrictions, are there regarding such civic "nuisances"?

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Apparently, the only vaguely relevant reference in the CNMI Code has to do with "disturbing the peace" - with little definition, and no time frame.

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Is this something that would be appropriate for the Mayor's office, or the Municipal Council, to handle? Could they invoke some kind of blue law, that would prohibit such noise after midnight - any day of the week? Set some kind of standards for day-time application as well, so that noise of any kind - beyond certain decibel levels - would be against the law, regardless of time of day?

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Particularly with election season already upon us, and not only pocket meetings but also rallies bound to become larger, more frequent and noisier, it seems to me perfect timing to get some controls in place. While one could call the police, that's usually neither neighborly, nor politically prudent. And can put the police in an awkward position, since noise is so relative. But with firm limits on the books, people might be more willing to be more considerate of their neighbors.

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Interesting sidelight: the trappings of civilization come without instructions. Such parties weren't as much of a disturbance before amplifiers came along. But when amplifiers and loudspeakers were introduced, there were no accompanying warnings that excessive use could be damaging to one's hearing, that going beyond certain decibel levels was socially unacceptable; that users of such devices should respect, and not invade, other people's space.

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Unfortunately, energy-conscious reliance on open windows for fresh air and breezes, instead of air conditioning, doesn't help matters.