

On My Mind  
9/28/01

What a relief to be back on Saipan! Not only from a logistic point of view - though the flight from Boston to LA, and a week later from LA to Saipan, was actually quite uneventful, with lots of empty seats to choose from and stretch out across - but also from an "atmospheric" one. Here on Saipan there does not appear to be the same degree of hyper-patriotism, militarism, paranoia in general or in particular against all things Islamic, the outright jingoism, that was so evident where I was, in the newspapers I read. [Jingoism: extreme nationalism; chauvinistic patriotism. Chauvinism: fanatical patriotism; prejudiced belief in the superiority of one's own ... group or kind]

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The American flag was everywhere: hung on bridges, from roof-tops, out windows; woven into sweaters, suspenders, tank tops; flapping from cars, busses and trucks, flashing on huge neon signs. So were the words: "God bless America." And the talk was all of war: mobilization of the National Guard, beefing up the defense budget, moving ships and weapons and soldiers to the Middle East, alternative attack strategies against Afghanistan.

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The treatment of Muslims - experienced first hand as well as reported in the press - was embarrassing, distressing: a man in Arabic attire headed for his brother's wedding arbitrarily kicked off the airplane by the pilot; a mother afraid to go shopping without an American friend in tow; a store fire-torched because it was erroneously thought the owner was Muslim; Muslims taunted, threatened, harassed, by unruly teenagers; Muslim businessmen and professionals canceling travel plans in fear for their safety.

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President Bush, supported by his chiefs of security and defense, demanding oaths of loyalty from countries around the world for his "war" on terrorism (against America); promising the elimination of terrorism, condemning Osama Bin Laden without a trial, without substantive proof, urging Americans to support the "homeland" by, among other things, spending money, booking airline flights.

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Fortunately, little of the madness seems to have reached this far. Which simply re-enforces my contention: being so remote isn't all bad.....

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What's sad, pathetic, about the misguided emotions and inflammatory rhetoric in which the "homeland" is awash, is that here was a unique opportunity for the U.S., its president and its leaders, to demonstrate true statesmanship. Having finally been made to suffer the particular horrors of terrorism - where the time, place and victims of death and destruction are so totally unpredictable - as have so many people, so many times, in so many other countries, the U.S. could have used the attacks to condemn all terrorism - throughout the world, not just on U.S. territory.

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The president could have turned to the United Nations as the appropriate arena for seeking

punishment for those responsible for the attacks on the U.S., rather than attempting to arm-twist individual nations. He could have turned to the UN, and through it, asked the rest of the world to help stamp out terrorism wherever it occurred, not just in the U.S. He could have asked God to bless all countries that have experienced terrorism. He - and the rest of U.S. government leaders - could have made the distinction between "formal" wars among nations, and isolated acts of terrorism, and could have demanded that the terrorists be punished in a court of international law, not on the field of battle. He could have made the U.S. a model of international leadership, strength and cooperation.

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Instead, U.S. leadership has perpetuated the same kind of isolationist, egocentric, domineering, patronizing behavior that has aggravated the rest of the world in the past, and that undoubtedly played a role in bringing about the attacks of September 11.

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The flags that wave should be UN flags. The signs should read "God bless peace," or "God bless a peaceful world" or "God bless law and order." The threats against those who helped or sheltered the terrorists should be dropped, for even the U.S. itself is guilty of having sheltered and helped terrorists of every ilk. The rhetoric should be of multilateral cooperation, not unilateral revenge.

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And, in a smaller sense, the CNMI, too, should look to the broader issue. It is not only the CNMI that is suffering, but every insular "territory" whose tourism - and economy - have been affected by the September 11 attacks. It is not only the CNMI, but every insular territory that now needs help in coping with the problems of limited air service, of delayed mail, of the need for increased security.

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Here, too, is an opportunity for the governor, and for government leaders, to exercise statesmanship and join with Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, Puerto Rico, and even Hawaii, to jointly ask the U.S. Congress for help and relief, rather than whining that it alone has suffered and should be helped. The problems of the islands are unique, and they - jointly - deserve unique assistance.

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Heretical as it may sound, there is also a need to acknowledge the ability of whoever master-minded the September 11 attack. According to hearsay, it was not an idly-chosen date, but the day major U.S. and Canadian airport directors were attending a conference in Canada, leaving their airports in the hands of deputy-directors. And while most airplanes are flying again, and the stock market is operating again, and the Pentagon is still there, there is no denying that the targets of the attack were well-chosen, and that the attack has had a major impact on the economics of the U.S. It is not wise, in other words, to belittle, or underestimate, the foe. The question that has not yet been asked in reasoned fashion - at least out loud - is "where would such a foe strike next?" Where indeed.

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My homecoming was marred by the vision of a panda-headed creature in every-day clothes, who just stood there waving his hand at airline passengers coming down the long walk from airplane to the immigration area at the airport. There was no flyer, no hand-out, no explanation. Never having seen a Saipanda commercial, I could only wonder what the point was.