

On My Mind
10/05/01

There ought to be a law prohibiting the passage of any appropriation bill, or any bill affecting spending authority, government financial management, or organization of government, in the three months prior to a gubernatorial election. Too many of the bills being proposed - and laws being passed - in this election season call for spending money - that really isn't available to begin with - only to buy votes rather than for any tangible good.

For example, the idea of separate MVB directorates for Tinian and Rota is bad enough - but the idea of separate dialysis centers is worse. Even though a multi-island entity, as is the CNMI, must spend disproportionately to provide basic infrastructure services to all its islands, there is a limit. The high cost of dialysis centers, for example - with their requirement for skilled staff, sterile equipment, 100% operational reliability - makes the benefit-to-cost ratio completely unjustifiable. - especially in a tight economy. Another example is the \$300,000 tab for a Washington lobbyist.

Granted, with the CNMI's fiscal year ending on September 30, such a law could cause some difficulties. But it might be just as well to force all budget concerns to be resolved earlier. A constitutional provision prohibits the passage of appropriation bills, etc., during the time between a regular election and the swearing in of a new administration - during a "lame duck" session, in other words. Maybe the CNMI needs another constitutional law setting the same limits on reckless pre- election spending.

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Suggestions for cutting government expenses in light of the increasingly poor economy have not been very creative, nor particularly beneficial in either the short or the long term. Dropping staff from the payroll may save money, but it leaves the resultant job-less staff with no income whatsoever.

A better idea might be to, first of all, finally wipe out that 30% early retirement bonus that has been so poorly interpreted, so badly mis-used, that has cost both the Retirement Fund and the CNMI treasury so many hundreds of thousands of dollars and lined the pockets of all too many "public servants." Even though there may not be a lot of retirees waiting for that bonus right now, what does exist now is growing recognition of the need to cut costs - somewhere, anywhere. The climate is ripe, in other words, to rescind that government give-away.

Another area where costs could be cut without penalizing any one person all that much would be to put a moratorium, at least, on the payment of double-dipping salaries. Employees should be asked to opt for either their retirement pay or their work salary, but not both. That might even enable government to save enough money so that it would not be necessary to drop any but the most expendable staff from payroll.

After all, isn't it better to have more people working at least part of the time, rather than having

some people paid double salaries, and others not working at all?

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Of the many e-mail messages I've received in the aftermath of the September attacks, a few stand out. One, which appeared in the Washington Times (<http://www.washtimes.com/commentary/20010919-6357240.htm>) tells of an airline pilot who told his passengers what to do if a hijacker threatened: everyone should stand up and throw anything available at that person to distract his attention, and more importantly, get a blanket over him and then wrestle him to the floor and keep him there, and to do the same with any confederates. "Remember, there will be one of him and maybe a few confederates, but there are 200 of you. You can overwhelm them." he said. "... some time down the road, it is going to happen again and I want you to know what to do."

"Now, since we're a family for the new few hours, I'll ask you to turn to the person next to you, introduce yourself, tell them a little about yourself and ask them to do the same."

That's not yet standard airline policy - and may never be, but it does offer one way of preventing such hijackings in the future. And it sure beats waiting for an Air Force general somewhere to order the hijacked plane shot, as Bush has now given authorization to do.

A far more disturbing e-mail I received again tells of a pilot, but this one tells fellow-pilots that in a hijacking they must not think of their passengers or their crew because they are all, in effect, already dead, and what the pilots must do instead is manipulate their airplanes - roll them over, cause them to drop sharply, etc. - to put hijackers off balance, and then to use everything from their hands to their ball point pens to attack their hi-jackers. The article gets pretty crude and gruesome - telling the pilot that he should use his fingers to gouge out the eyeballs of the hijacker. Yes, these are tense and stressful times, but that doesn't mean we should encourage those around us to become as violent as the terrorists.

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At least President Bush, and the war-mongers with whom he has surrounded himself, have retreated from their initial calls for immediate all-out war. Now the country is being told it will be a long-drawn-out affair - a matter of years, even - but still the rhetoric is of war. It is, however, more than a question of semantics. It is a matter of association. "Anything goes" in war. Sacrifices, restrictions, arbitrary exercises of power, a focus on things military at the expense of "civilian" needs like education, roads, or medical research, are all acceptable in times of war.

Moreover, Bush has vowed to fight his "war" until terrorism is destroyed. But terrorism, by its very nature - or by the nature of man, if you will - will never be totally destroyed. Maintaining a perpetual state of war is neither desirable nor feasible. Trying to stamp out all evil, all terrorism, simply isn't realistic. Bush and his advisors would do better to label the effort as a campaign, not a war, a campaign to contain and control terrorism, not eradicate it. Spin doctors, are you listening?

