

On My Mind

12/7/01

Today is another of the CNMI's "C" days - this time, to celebrate the signing of the CNMI Constitution. Neither local paper mentioned the anniversary on December 4<sup>th</sup>, the day the Constitution was originally signed in 1976, or on December 5<sup>th</sup> when, according to Don Farrell's excellent history of the CNMI, additional copies were signed. Today, set aside to observe Constitution Day this year, there is again no mention of the occasion in the <I>Variety</I>; in the <I>Tribune</I> there are five ads congratulating the CNMI on the anniversary. The same issue of the <I>Tribune</I> has seven ads congratulating the Hyatt on its 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary.

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This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the signing of the CNMI Constitution - an anniversary usually celebrated with extra fanfare. How sad that an occasion of such significance - for the Constitution is the backbone of the CNMI - is being so totally ignored.

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Though it is now nearly three months since the attacks on New York City's twin towers, the <I>New Yorker's</I> response to that disaster only recently reached my mailbox - thanks to the vagaries of the U.S. mail, and, no doubt, the added delays caused by both the aftermath of the disaster itself and the subsequent anthrax threats. The magazine's response came in its September 24 issue - apparently the <I>New Yorker</I> works on a two-week lead time.

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Dedicated entirely to the terrorist attack, it is an outstanding issue - from the subtlety of its cover and the variety of reactions from its regular writers to the immediacy of the photographs and the poignancy of its last page poem. I found the issue awesome - with an openness, an honesty, an insightfulness that no other written reports have encapsulated so effectively - a real "keeper."

The fact that it is still so moving, still rings so true some 2 1/2 months later, make it all the more compelling.

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Another "keeper" - though not powerful in quite the same way - is Bruce Petty's <I>Saipan: Oral Histories of the Pacific War.</I> Though it is marked with a 2002 copyright date, it is available now from amazon.com. The book includes the stories of numerous well-known people from the CNMI - among them David Sablan, Maria Crisostomo, Escolastica Cabrera, Felipe Ruak - as well as accounts by people from Guam, Yap, Palau, and members of the military who served on Saipan. Fascinating reading!

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No longer worth even the paper it's written on, apparently, is the proposal once submitted to the Commonwealth Utilities Corporation by Enron, the former energy giant that is now in the throes of bankruptcy. The CUC is fortunate indeed that a contract with the company never actually went into effect - the CUC - and the CNMI - could have ended up like California. According to commentary carried in the <I>Tribune</I> earlier this week, "California ratepayers will pay billions too much for power over the next decades to foot the bill for price gouging by Enron and

its proteges.”

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Hopefully, those in the Legislature who have been calling for an investigation of the Enron contract cancellation will now turn their attention to issues more worthy of their time and attention.

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To be taken with a grain of salt is the survey that made <I>Variety</I> headlines today. The survey, conducted by a political science class at NMC, found that 66% of those polled were in favor of applying the federal minimum wage to the CNMI. According to the article, the federal minimum wage is \$5.15 per hour; the minimum wage in the CNMI is \$3.05 per hour.

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It’s no surprise that people polled in the survey said they favored the higher minimum wage - who wouldn’t agree that it would be nice to be paid an additional \$2.10 per hour? The problem, though, is in the implementation. Until, unless, the economy strengthens, the money simply isn’t there.

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The survey made no mention of the fact that few private sector businesses could afford to pay all their employees the higher minimum wage - particularly in today’s weak economy - and that imposition of the federal minimum wage could, in fact, worsen the present economic decline.

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It would be irresponsible to act on the basis of that survey without taking into consideration the real costs involved.

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The machinations involved in the juggling and shifting of power preparatory to the opening of the 13<sup>th</sup> Commonwealth Legislature have been most intriguing. There appears to be an aura of reasonableness and civility not previously much in evidence in the negotiations that always accompany the seating of a new legislature.

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In the “old” legislature it would appear there are also machinations - at least one supposes that the lack of a quorum in the House is not accidental.....

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There are those who appear apprehensive at the alignment of power in the incoming Senate - with Saipan senators left in a minority position. It’s certainly an historic first - but it will be up to the Rota and Tinian senators as to whether it will be any less effective, or fair, than previous arrangements. Certainly, their willingness to share committee chairmanship positions is encouraging.

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It would be refreshing, to say the least, if both houses dropped the punitive treatment of minority members that has tainted the legislature in the past.

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This column is shorter than usual because through some fluke the computer swallowed a goodly portion of it - refusing to regurgitate it - and there was not time to reconstitute it.