

On My Mind

2/8/02

From the looks of it, how much things change under this administration - and how quickly - may depend to a considerable extent on how well, and how long, the new Rota/Tinian alignment in the Senate will be able to work together. The Governor, in his inaugural speech, declared his intent to reform the way government operates - to make it open, fair, accessible, and fiscally responsible.

Earlier this week, House Speaker Heinz S. Hofschneider told members of the Saipan Chamber of Commerce that he intended to make the work of the House open, accessible and responsive as well. The legislative tracking system being developed for the House, he said, would allow anyone to determine the status of any bill introduced in the House, and to add his or her comments to the bill on-line. Hofschneider also noted that the House rules have been changed, and bills will no longer be allowed to die in committee - they must be reported out after 90 days.

Hofschneider talked about other reforms he hopes to bring about - in the retirement system, in the use of excise taxes, in expanding employment in the private sector; as House Speaker he is in a good position to see that his ideas are acted upon. With both the House Speaker and the Governor pledging to reform government, there is reason to hope that perhaps this time there actually will be meaningful change.

Then there's the Senate. The present "alliance" has pledged to support the Governor, but there's been no test yet to see whether its strength will hold. And unfortunately, two of Saipan's Senators - one junior, one senior - have given every indication that they have no intention of accepting the present power alignment. Will Senators Ramon S. Guerrero and Pete P. Reyes be able to derail the new administration? Or will the Senate alliance hold? Only time will tell.

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Americans are being brain-washed. And apparently, no one is objecting. The President, in his state of the union address earlier this week repeatedly referred to the nation as being at war. And he is defending the biggest defense budget the nation has ever seen as fully justified - because the nation is at war.

The problem - or one of them - is that the U.S. is not officially at war. Though the President keeps saying that we are, legally it takes Senate approval to formally put the U.S. in a state of war. The President has not even submitted a request to the Senate to declare war. Nor can he - because there is no nation - yet - to declare war against. Which may be one reason Bush keeps talking about the "threats" posed by Iran and Iraq and North Korea.

The defense budget being proposed will put the nation back in debt - just two years after it had been announced that there was finally a surplus in the U.S. budget. The Bush budget closes down thousands of smaller programs across the country in the interests of the defense budget - programs that educated, trained, inspired, encouraged, nurtured, protected, and enriched people

from every walk of life, people whose growth and well-being will now be sacrificed in the interests of the war that isn't.

And Bush isn't even considering rescinding those tax cuts - given mostly to the wealthy - that were passed when it looked as though the budget surplus was real.

It's a rather weird state of affairs: Bush claims the captives can't be considered prisoners of war because they don't wear uniforms - even though they were shooting at perceived enemies. On the other hand, that doesn't seem to stop Bush from acting like there is a war on - even though war has not been declared, and there's no nation upon which to declare that war.

Yet the mood of the country is such that no one is questioning this odd state of affairs. And the President continues to earn extraordinarily high approval rates from the people. For the time being, at least, his spin-doctors seem to have the upper hand.

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Disturbing, on a different level, is the news that Payless Market has been sold to a Korean company. Actually, the fact itself is not disturbing - it is the statement that the new owner, Hon Jun Yoon, gave to the <I>Tribune</I> earlier this week. "We're planning to add some more food items from the Philippines, Korea, China and more imported products," he said.

A cursory survey of available grocery products on Saipan would seem to indicate that oriental foodstuffs are already in plentiful supply throughout the island. Many western foods, however, have often been available only at Payless - buttermilk, capers, honey wheat bagels, dark rye bread, dill pickles, Paul's Trim and Skim milk and other dairy products, soups other than Campbells, a selection of orange juice not from concentrate at reasonable prices, other than Kellogg cereals, Tom and Jerry and Godiva ice cream, frozen blintzes and quiches, to name a few.

Many other products - frozen ready-to-eat meals, baking mixes, pasta choices, multi-grain breads, canned vegetables - have been available in greater variety at Payless than elsewhere.

While Yoon has not said he will discontinue such foodstuffs, his intent to add more non-Western foods would seem to indicate that that will indeed occur (unless he plans on expanding the store. Otherwise, where would he put them?). And that would be upsetting. Food does more than provide nutrition. It also provides comfort. And the increasing availability of western-style comfort foods has contributed considerably toward making my life more tolerable, more enjoyable, more satisfying, in the face of the occasional frustrations and aggravations brought on by island living.

I'd be most unhappy if those comfort foods were to disappear.

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Are people entitled to a job? It isn't an entitlement that is described, or granted, in either the CNMI Constitution or the U.S. Constitution. Both constitutions guarantees various other rights

- the right to an education through high school, the right to a healthy environment, the right to peaceably assemble, etc. But the right to employment, to a job, is not granted in either document - or any other, so far as I am aware.

Yet the belief - or an attitude expressing that belief - seems to be more and more in evidence of late. In fact, the belief, in the CNMI, seems to be that people are entitled to a government job. And this belief is so widely held, and has been held for so long, that many do not even appear to question its validity.

Lawmakers and members of the executive branch alike are sharing stories of the many family members, relatives and friends coming to them asking for jobs. In turn, legislators are turning to the private sector, asking private enterprise to provide the jobs that they themselves do not have to offer. 'In times of a depressed economy, we need your help,' government officials tell members of the private sector, apparently not understanding that a slowed economy hurts both sectors equally, and just as government has no jobs to offer, neither does the private sector.

The rhetoric has focused on offering every seeker a job. How about focusing on the need on the part of the job-seekers to make sure they've got qualifications someone is willing to pay for? Even in a healthy economy, businesses cannot prosper if they carry inefficient workers on their payroll. In a weak economy, the need is even greater for efficient staff, since fewer are being asked to do more with less.

The creation of jobs to absorb the jobless is not the answer. The answer lies in offering training to the jobless so that they may qualify for the jobs that are still there. That too costs money. But training is an investment, and employers may be more willing to help set up job-skill training than to hire unqualified help.