

On My Mind
4/5/02

Some day maybe the relationship between the Tinian Dynasty Hotel and the people of Tinian will make sense, but it sure doesn't now. In the beginning, there seemed to be broad support for development of the Dynasty - a large, elaborate hotel/casino - in the expectation that it would stimulate the island's economy. Instead, the Dynasty appears to have been left to flounder while expansion of Tinian's airport, crucial to the casino's viability, was put off again and again. The complex has yet to operate at full capacity, except for business brought by recent military maneuvers.

Yet Tinian's local delegation chairman, Senator Joaquin G. Adriano, presumably with the support of the people of Tinian, is proposing that another casino be brought to Tinian - this time a floating casino to be anchored off Tinian's shore. If one casino isn't making ends meet, what good does it do to add a second one? If there's not been enough traffic to sustain the existing casino, where will the floating casino get its customers? And just what is it that has led backers of a floating casino to believe that there's money to be made when the Dynasty hasn't done so?

Why would anyone, especially a representative of the people of Tinian, want to deliberately undercut, compete with, the long-suffering casino that has held on all these years? Is there something about the way Tinian's gaming commission has operated? A failure to give the people a sense of shareholder in the venture? It just doesn't make a lot of sense to me.

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On neighboring Rota, a different - and more amorphous - proposal has been put forth for helping its economy. But Attorney General Robert Torres has it right as far as the offer from the Mahareshi and his Global Country for World Peace is concerned - so far they haven't done anything but talk, so there's nothing tangible to which to respond. In order to do what it says it wants to, the group will have to obtain a business license, lease land, obtain a CRMO permit, perhaps even a DEQ permit, arrange to bring in workers, etc., etc., etc.

In order to obtain the special rights and privileges it has said it wants, it will have to spell them out in writing to the courts, the Governor, the U.S. Departments of State and Interior, and perhaps even the U.N. All of which should provide documentation of what the groups intentions are, as well as the details of its proposal.

In the meantime, learning as much as possible about the group's history - what it has attempted in the past, what happened to those efforts and why - should be fully researched, because that background information is necessary for making informed decisions down the road. Not only the Department of Labor and Immigration, but also the Department of Commerce, the Department of Finance, and the Attorney General's Office should be asked to look into the group's past activities.

However, until there's more information, taking sides on an issue as nebulous as the undocu-

mented claims of the Global Country for World Peace is a waste of time.

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The individual who thought up the idea of having tourists plant trees in the CNMI deserves a medal! Planting a tree will give tourists a sense of ownership - of leaving something of themselves behind that they'll want to come back and re-visit. If done well, it will also give tourists a sense of contributing to the island's environment.

Not only does the project, being sponsored by the Marianas Visitors Authority and Pacific Development, Inc., instill in the tourist - and the tourist's friends and family - a tangible long-range interest in the CNMI, but it also benefits the CNMI directly. And it does it all for a lot less than it costs to send dozens of people on junkets all over Japan and China.

But I would cavil at the idea that the tourists should pay \$25 each for the privilege. Why not charge just a token \$5 or so? Why not let them promote local trees, instead of just fancy ornaments? Why not let them plant where windbreaks are needed, where erosion control is needed, rather than only at tourist sites? Why not let them make a real contribution?

Here's a low-cost, "outside-of-the-box" idea that has tremendous potential for enhancing tourist traffic in the CNMI. Will it, too, be killed by the self-serving, narrow interests of the tourism industry?

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Another kudos goes to whoever is responsible for the beautification of the crossroad that marks the turn-off to Hamilton's. That effort, which is quite elaborate, was begun long before the current campaign to dress up Middle Road. Whoever's responsible deserves recognition!

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And kudos as well to Senator David M. Cing for his courageous proposal to cut \$4 million from the legislators' budget in the face of the CNMI's shrinking economy. Cing has proposed cutting not only legislators' salaries, but also their office account funds, as well as leadership funds for operation of each chamber.

At a time when, despite the fact that all of government is being urged to cut costs the Administration appears to be increasing them, Cing's proposal on behalf of the legislative branch is doubly welcome. The Senator's proposal is realistic, is timely, and offers a challenge to the Judiciary, as well as a much-deserved barb to the Executive Branch in general and to the Administration in particular.

And it certainly should be more palatable to the Legislature than a proposal to reduce its size!

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The Retirement Fund Trustees should know better. The Fund's investments have, on the whole, done very well - a comfort to its members who rely on those investment earnings for their retirement income. It's pretty obvious that those investments have done so well primarily because of the efforts of the Fund's multiple high-class, well-paid investment consultants. If only individual stockholders had such help!

Now the Fund Trustees have apparently decided to give individual members of the Fund the chance to try their luck at playing the market. The Fund is looking for a consultant to write legislation that would turn the responsibility for investing the Fund's money over to individual Fund members through what is called "defined contribution." Each member would be responsible for deciding how to invest the money in his or her retirement account.

No longer would the Fund have to pay high-class professional investment consultants to manage the retirement funds. Instead, it would only pay someone to administer, rather than manage, the members' investments.

How the Trustees think that individual members of the Fund, with only limited contact with brokers, consultants, and money managers, without access to investment clubs, without timely access to all the money management magazines, with only the web as access tool, could begin to make decisions anywhere near as good as paid investment counselors is beyond imagination. Defined contribution plans may offer promise in urban, sophisticated settings. Here in the CNMI they spell disaster to the entire retirement system.

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I do not find the promise by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld that Aby Zubaydah - allegedly Osama Bin Laden's highest ranking lieutenant yet captured - will not be tortured very re-assuring. Newspaper reports have made it quite clear that the U.S. military expects to garner a great deal of useful information from the captive. In fact, Rumsfeld himself said U.S. interrogators intend to draw "every single thing out of him" that might head off terrorist attacks.

Given today's climate, and recent Pentagon discussion of the use of dis-information, how much to trust Rumsfeld's promise depends almost entirely on how he and his colleagues define "torture." As we all know, words in wartime often acquire strange new meanings.....