

On My Mind

5/03/02

A federal judge has now halted the bombing of Farallon de Medinilla for thirty days. And already, the military is asking for a lifting of the temporary ban. I'm sorry, but I have a hard time believing that in the whole world - all seven continents and seven seas - only the CNMI's tiny island of Farallon de Medinilla meets the U.S. military's criteria for practice aerial bombing runs.

Elsewhere in the Pacific alone there are at least two countries I know of that have not just one or two, but hundreds of uninhabited islands to choose from. And most probably don't provide haven to dozens of migratory birds and endangered species, as does Farallon de Medinilla.

So why is the U.S. military so determined to continue bombing Farallon de Medinilla? Probably because it doesn't have to pay for it. And because, since FDM is U.S. territory, it doesn't have to negotiate a treaty in order to do so. It helps that CNMI officials, in their short-sighted, self-centered view, have voiced no serious objection - have, in fact, encouraged the military to continue bombing the island and its birds and the surrounding reef and its inhabitants.

How much truth there is to the fear that if the CNMI were to balk at U.S. military use of FDM, other military support to the CNMI would disappear is not clear. The CNMI offers many other benefits to the military, including Tinian's large playground for war games, and the hospitality of conveniently accessible American soil in the tropics for troop "R&R," not to mention its proximity to Asia and the Middle East. It hardly seems likely that lack of access to FDM would matter all that much.

Moreover, from a long-range perspective, it is far more important that the diversity of bird species be protected, that the island and the reef around it be left unharmed, than that U.S. military hone their bombing skills. The world will - God willing - continue to exist for thousands of years. Its health - and the health of the creatures on it - man and animal alike - depend on the diversity man allows to exist. The more birds are killed today, the less will live for tomorrow, and for our children's children's children.

On the other hand, U.S.' needs for these specific military skills are short-range - they will change as technology changes, as power shifts, as civilizations rise and fall.

But there's little hope that the long-range view will prevail. At the very least, the military should be banned from using live ordnance, and from bombing the birds during mating season.

<center>* * *</center>

And speaking of wildlife, I cringe at the thought of tigers confined to cages for the amusement of night-clubbers, party-goers, as we are now doing with the tigers at Sand Castle. We don't do that to domestic cats. Why do we think it's ok to do it with non-domesticated ones - who are not only several times larger, but who are even less accustomed to confined space? Are we supposed to believe there are such things as domesticated tigers? Who are content to give up the freedom to move freely in their natural settings?

I worry, too, about the many birds that flutter in the sun-baked cage in front of the Diamond Hotel. Such density is not natural, nor is the limit on their flying space. Sure, it makes them twitter all the time, and that generates an interesting sound for tourists, but what does it do to the life-span of those birds?

Yes, there have been tigers in circuses, and birds in bird cages, for generations. And, perhaps, one could argue that they've long since been bred for captivity. Nonetheless, there are standards, criteria, for what constitutes healthy surroundings. The Rota Zoo is a good example of an animal-friendly zoo. (The Saipan zoo might also be, but I confess I've never gone to see it, so I can't comment.) Is there an agency in the CNMI responsible for making sure such standards are in place and observed, that captive wildlife gets humane treatment?

<center>* * *</center>

I lost two friends last month, and I grieve for them both. One was a personal friend - a wonderful, warm, talented, caring, adventurous gal in her fifties whom I was just getting to know, but was already fond of and eager to know better - a scuba diver, web-page mistress extraordinaire, ob-gyn nurse unafraid to take a personal interest in her clients, a caring parent. She passed away while I was off-island, so I wasn't even able to say good-bye, or express my condolences to her family. I miss her already.

The other "friend" is KSAI - which shut its doors this past week after 24 years of operation on Saipan. The station was my window to the world when I first came to the CNMI some 21 years ago. It offered daily news casts when there was no newspaper to do so. It broadcast island events live - inaugurations, July 4 parades, art festivals - before cable tv did. It broadcast easy music I could listen to. It offered interviews with local leaders, talk shows, discussions of current events. It offered 24-hour weather forecasts long before they were available on the internet. Even when power was down, so long as the phone worked and KSAI's generators worked, it was still possible to hear the progress of the passing typhoon.

I shall miss it too.

<center>* * *</center>

Short takes: It may well be true that there are federal grant opportunities out there that the CNMI has not taken advantage of. But it does not necessarily follow that it requires a highly-paid lobbyist (like Aranza?) to find them. In the first place, not all federal grants are suitable to circumstances in the CNMI. To force CNMI into a mold to fit would not only be dishonest, but could distort local values. Besides, a good researcher should be all that's necessary to find those grants.

<center>*</center>

Is requiring all government agency grant applications to be processed through the governor's office micro-management or good planning? Don't all federal grants require approval from the governor's office in any case?

<center>*</center>

The dilemma faced by those who deposited money into the Bank of Saipan - now in receivership - only proves that politics and relatives, on this island, at least, seem stronger than common sense. Taking risks is always chancey, but taking risks with money is downright foolish. Bank of Saipan was not federally insured yet even the government deposited its money there.

The shock is the accusation against Tom Aldan, who had built a history of honesty, straight-forwardness, conscientiousness, as Administrator of the Retirement Fund. Unfortunately, it is likely that the Bank of Saipan will never regain credibility; and the CNMI is bound to be tainted by its problems.

<center>*</center>

Will Willie Tan also be tainted by its problems? That remains to be seen. In this case it wouldn't be quite so unfortunate. With Willie's hand in everything from the media to communications to poker machines, from garment factories to shipping to insurance, it's easy to feel paranoid, and a rupture in that spreading empire would not be unwelcome.

<center>*</center>

The House Speaker complained, recently, that the quality of bills introduced by House members has not improved. A worthy project that deserves legislative support is DEQ's proposal to create a multi-purpose wetland in Garapan that would treat the runoff in the drainage ditches, thereby eliminating contamination of the hotel beach fronts in the area. A plan to convert the former Samoan housing area into a landscaped pond system was presented at a DEQ symposium last month.

The problem is that few legislators attended, and they may not, therefore, be aware of the proposal. At the symposium, Brian Beardon, DEQ's environmental engineer, suggested that the resulting landscaped pond area could be used to create a pedestrian mall of small shops and restaurants. If done right, it could be a welcome contrast to the unlovely, hucksterish, atmosphere that now prevails in most of Garapan's tourist area.

<center>*</center>

Ken Govendo's letter in today's <I>Variety</I> in support of Tom Camacho - the first serious letter of his I've seen in print - is eloquently written. Members of the Board of the Development Disabilities Council had apparently tried to oust Camacho, its Director, through some flim-flamery. An second attempt, following proper procedures, failed and Camacho is still in office - which could be seen as proof that the first attempt wasn't above-board.

Will ability ever be seen as more important than politics?