

On My Mind

6/7/02

The vague warnings that continue to come out of Washington - that more terrorist attacks could occur in the U.S. at any time - aren't very helpful. In fact, there never was a time - and never will be - when a "terrorist" attack could not occur. There simply is no way to screen every person who enters the U.S., or to monitor every single individual already living in the U.S. The country is too large and there are too many people, too many cities, too many buildings, too many gatherings, and far too few police or security guards or investigative forces to ever be able to assure that everyone, every place, every landmark, in the entire nation is protected.

Actually, it's a wonder that so few terrorist attacks have actually occurred. Presumably this is, at least in part, due to the ever watchful eye of national security forces. But while the new powers given the FBI and the new curtailments on individual liberties may decrease the likelihood of future attacks, those measures will never be able to stop them all. Acts of terrorism are going to continue to be a possibility as long as there are individuals willing to carry them out.

It is, nonetheless, disturbing that these additional powers, additional restrictions, are being approved in the name of the "war" on terrorism. There is no end to that war on terrorism - because acts of terrorism can never be totally eliminated. Yet at some point the granting of additional power to investigative agencies, the erosion of personal liberties, must stop. The problem is how, and where, to draw the line.

One way might be to initiate a system along the lines of the air raid wardens in England during World War II. There, local residents assumed many of the responsibilities of uniformed police officers, most of whom had joined the military: to help people into air raid shelters; help fight the fires, control traffic, clean up, after bombs had struck; protect areas from looting, etc. In the U.S., the need at this point is not so much to clean up after disasters, but to identify possible disasters in the making.

Local residents could be asked to take more of an interest in their neighbors and their neighborhood, and in their surroundings wherever they happen to be: on the way to work, or to shop, in their office and the stores, at sports events, performances, on the bus, in the train, on an airplane. A network could be established through which to channel and evaluate reports coming from local residents, that would weed out crank calls, identify patterns, flag items requiring further checking.

To carry the hateful "war" analogy a bit further, participants would not be paid, but would be expected to carry out their responsibilities as their contribution to the war effort.

Such a voluntary observation system ("spy" system is perhaps too strong) would add thousands of additional eyes and ears to the investigative capability of existing agencies - not enough to ensure that all terrorist attacks were discovered in time, but certainly enough to reduce even more the chance that they would be.

In addition, such a voluntary observation system would finally give the people of the U.S. a task,

a function, that would allow them to overcome their feeling of helplessness, and to feel that they too had a role to play in the war against terrorism.

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What do poker machines, the Kyoto protocol and the bombing of Farallon de Medinilla have in common? Well, all are making headlines in the news, but there's more. All three involve a conflict between current profits and future calamity. The scope of the calamity may vary, but in each case, the calamity is long-lasting.

Take the poker machines. There are proposals to shut down those without security devices in order to safeguard the poker parlor attendants (wouldn't increasing police protection be more logical?), moving them out of residential areas, increasing poker machine fees - all of which might decrease the number of machines out there - at the same time as there are demands that an impact study be done before fees are increased because of the effect on the local economy.

But the bottom line is that poker machines do damage family and social structure, and generate their own economic downturn when people lose their assets to the addictive pastime. Moreover, the damage creates new and costly demands on social support programs, from welfare to health care to legal aid. Current boon to the CNMI budget notwithstanding, the long term impact of poker parlors is more harmful to the society than helpful.

The same is true of the situation in Farallon de Medinilla. In the short term, there are alleged benefits to the military and to the economy of both Guam and the CNMI if the bombing is allowed to continue. In the long term, however, the biodiversity of the earth as a whole is at issue. If the bombing reduces the number of given bird species, the entire world will suffer forever after. (And the argument that only part of the island is bombed is specious. No bird - or any other living creature - can be immune to the airplanes making their approach, to the falling bombs, to the explosions when they hit - on an island as small as FDM.)

The Kyoto protocol is an even more egregious example, because here it is the most powerful nation on earth, not merely a small island entity, that has decided present gain is worth future loss. The United States refuses to sign the Kyoto protocol, which sets lower emission rates for the release of toxic gases, because, President Bush claims, it would hurt the U.S. economy. And now Australia refuses to sign, because the U.S. has not signed. The Kyoto protocol would reduce the threat of global warming, which is already causing a shrinkage of the polar icecaps and will eventually cause flooding throughout the world.

Present-day profits are a tempting motive for retaining poker machines, for continuing to bomb Farallon de Medinilla, for not signing the Kyoto protocol. But as the understanding of the earth's fragility, the interdependence of the world's resources becomes clearer, it becomes more and more irresponsible to think only of today, and not of the consequences for tomorrow.

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Giving credit where it's due: In addition to the museum's acting director Gigi York, DFS also deserves credit for the museum exhibit now on display in the Galleria. In fact it was DFS that came to the Museum with the offer of space for an exhibit, according to York. With the departure of the Warner Brothers store, the large store window - ideally located at a major entry to the Galleria - sat empty, and it was at DFS president Marian Aldan Pierce's suggestion that it was offered to the museum.

DFS' Visual Merchandising staff were also responsible for the lettering and for assembling the various parts of the exhibit, while the Museum staff provided the text, sequence and content. The exhibit provides an overview of the history of the Marianas from early contact to the present day. It includes numerous photographs and artifacts - an inviting introduction to the many items on display at the museum itself.

Further, many of the exhibit cases used to house the items in the museum were donated by DFS Galleria. Pierce said it is all part of the DFS interest in supporting local art and artists.

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A recanting: the allegation that a member of the media was hiring out as public relations consultant to politicians currently in office has been vigorously denied by the media member. A reader had chided me for not naming names. As the old saw goes: discretion is the better part of valor!