

On My Mind

7/5/02

Should the CNMI worry that it is far less prepared to fight terrorism than is the mainland, as yesterday's <I>Variety</I> headlines warned? I don't think so. The population is too small, the sites for possible destruction are too limited (the Nauru building hardly seems a worthy target), the location is too remote. If an act of terrorism were to occur here - depending, of course, on its nature - it would probably attract little if any attention anywhere else in the world. Terrorists might try to enter the U.S. via the CNMI, but commit an act of terror here? Why bother?

On Guam, the case is slightly different. There are U.S. military installations there. Since U.S. armed forces would be involved, an act of terrorism there might attract attention elsewhere. But not here. And not in American Samoa, either.

It seems incredibly uninformed, unintelligent, uncritical, unimaginative, undiscerning, that the nation's top security advisers would not have figured out, long since, that there are some areas, some institutions, some installations in the United States that are far more appealing to terrorists than others, like big power dams, large reservoirs, huge military installations, crowded city streets, transnational financial institutions. And that priority in protecting them against terrorism is far more critical than protecting a bunch of tiny islands out in the western Pacific.

Is it a question of empire building for the so-called homeland security agency? Succumbing to lobbyists who supply terrorist-detecting equipment? Trying to find ways to spend the exorbitant defense budget that Congress has rashly passed? Unless someone out there knows something we don't, it just doesn't seem to make much sense to spend a lot of money, time, energy, building terrorist defenses here.

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Last week's column spoke of the need to read newspapers carefully to get at the truth. But as this past week's news reports proved, sometimes not even close reading reveals the real story. Media stories everywhere blared forth - and are still doing it - that the courts have declared the U.S. pledge of allegiance unconstitutional. Nothing could be further from the truth!

What one judge, in an appellate court in California, did rule was: "We hold that (1) the 1954 Act adding the words "under God" to the Pledge, and (2) EGUSD's policy and practice of teacher-led recitation of the pledge, with the added words included, (<I>emphasis added</I>) violate the Establishment Clause" of the U.S. Constitution.

In other words, only the words "under God" - which had not been in the original pledge of allegiance to begin with - were declared unconstitutional. And only the Elk Grove United School District's policy and practice (<I>emphasis added</I>) of having teachers lead the recitation of the pledge with those words in it were declared unconstitutional, not the pledge itself.

It seems very strange that no one - from the President himself (or one of his aides) to national columnists to judicial peers - appears to have bothered to actually read the decision before going public with the ridiculous, exaggerated, inflammatory conclusion that 9th Circuit Judge Appellate Judge Alfred T. Goodwin had ruled the pledge of allegiance unconstitutional. A disgraceful performance indeed!

And no way to inspire confidence in media news stories, either.

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Along similar lines: an article in Monday's <I>PDN</I> told of an advertising campaign being launched by the American Bar Association to promote discussion about the U.S. Constitution. The article said that the first ad that would appear would "picture a little girl sleeping under a blanket imprinted with an image of the Constitution on it. The caption: "Security Blanket."

And just how is that supposed to promote discussion of the Constitution? The ad might be called sexist, because only a girl is pictured. or racist, because only one ethnicity is pictured. or age-ist, because only a young girl is pictured. But the Constitution? Only thing one might argue about in that picture, it would seem, is whether it should be considered a security blanket, or a firm mattress/foundation.

The ad firm hired to carry out the ABA's campaign wasn't mentioned, but surely it can do better than that?

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And speaking of ads and values, it must be difficult for the Marianas Visitor's Authority to justify the hundreds of thousands of dollars it spends on advertising the CNMI to potential tourists - after all, there's no easy way to correlate dollars spent in Japan or Korea or China with tourists arriving in the CNMI.

In the absence of hard data, one has to wonder why the MVA keeps putting so many of its eggs into that one basket. And why its members so consistently seem to buy into the argument that the way to attract more tourists is to spend more money on advertising.

Wouldn't it be nice if the MVA spent some small part of its advertising budget - say 10% - on improving what it is that it is trying to sell? On helping the mayor clean up the many illegal dump sites on Saipan? on consistent clean-up of the beaches? on on-island campaigns teaching and encouraging residents to clean up their yards, clean up after their beach barbecues and picnics, stop littering along the roads? on working with the Department of Public Works to get the dump closed, the new land fill operational? on working with legislators to establish marine and land-based preserves to protect the environment? On beefing up law enforcement, crime prevention, tourist protection? On perfecting the product rather than on selling a mediocre one?

In the same sense that if the road is there, people will take it, so is it true that if the destination is worth it, people will come.

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Early "issues" of last week's column failed to include the url for Charlie Reyes' column. The error, due to ignorance of html coding protocols, has since been corrected. For readers who missed it, the url is: www.cnmi.net/community/il.

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Contrary to some people's belief, the "happy birthday" sign above the MVA building in Garapan is not sponsored by the Marianas Visitors Authority. Rather, it is the building owner who is extending birthday greetings to various and sundry island residents.

The flashing light sign now also on that roof, which offers time and temperature as well as ad campaigns, has its own sponsor - a phone number, not part of the flashing lights, is posted nearby. It will be interesting to see how long the time of day remains accurate. Someone should tell the sign sponsor, though, to check the location of the thermometer whose reading is shown on the light sign. Surely it can't be 99 degrees as often as that indicator would have you believe - particularly not this past week, when typhoon Chaan-related winds have done much to keep the temperature pleasantly cool.