

On My Mind
10/18/02

Mass murder is always mind-numbing. The impersonal-ness of numeric death counts - just corpses, not men and women, students and friends, vacationers and honey-mooners, Europeans and Australians - adds to the numbness, makes it more unreal. It's hard to think of the 200 individual families who've just lost a member, who are just beginning to grieve at the sudden, senseless death of their erstwhile vacationing son or daughter.

What makes the Bali bombing particularly hateful is that it happened on the predominantly Hindu island of Bali, with whom Indonesia's Muslims had no quarrel. One theory has it that the terrorists - presumably radical Muslims - chose Bali for precisely that reason - that they did not want to run the risk of harming any of their own, presumably Muslim, people. But in the long run, even Indonesia's Muslims will not escape the consequences.

Given that tourism is its main industry, the bombing of a popular tourist site - and the high death toll - will have a disastrous effect on Bali's economy, making the Hindus the prime victim. But the reverberations of that event will also affect the economy not only of the rest of Indonesia, primarily Muslim, but most likely, of the rest of Asia as well.

My heart goes out to all who've lost a loved one, to all who've lost their home, to all who've lost their livelihood.

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It's a little difficult to understand the U.S. reaction to the tragedy. No American facilities were involved. Of nearly 200 dead, to date only two have been identified as American. Yet the U.S. not only ordered its embassy staff and employees to leave Indonesia, and encouraged all other unnecessary personnel to do so as well; the American President has also roundly chastised Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri for refusing to take a stronger stand against the alleged terrorists in Indonesia, and as much as issued an ultimatum that she better start doing so now.

The Australian government, on the other hand, with the great majority of the fatalities expected to be Australian, has been more supportive and sympathetic to her plight. Australia has offered a reward of \$1 million for information leading to the arrest and conviction of those responsible for the attack, and has sent more than 40 specialists to help with the investigation. And while some have called Bali "in a sense almost a little Australian colony" - prompted by the large number of Australians who regularly vacation there - no one in Australian government has as publicly or as harshly criticized the Indonesian president as has President Bush.

Megawati's position is difficult at best. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that help and support would do a lot more to resolve the situation than criticism and "I-told-you-so's."

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The Marianas Visitors Authority, with its usual tunnel vision, believes that Australians who might have gone to Bali would now come to the CNMI, provided that proper marketing is done.

MVA Chairman David M. Sablan is quoted as saying, in the 10/18 issue of the <I>Tribune</I>, “Especially after the Bali incident, we have to make Saipan, Tinian, and Rota available as alternative destinations to those who have enjoyed going to Bali, such as Australian travelers.”

The charm of Bali - that Australians can't find on their own shores - lies in its strong sense of Hindu culture and customs, its artisans and handicrafts. There is also the appeal of its topography - its mountains and terraced fields, its steep hills and deep valleys. The CNMI has none of those things.

A tropical climate the Australians can find at home. And their Great Barrier Reef outshines anything our reefs can offer, any day of the week.

The MVA might better spend its money on improving tourist safety, on cleaning up the lagoon and on protecting Saipan's reefs, than on mounting an expensive marketing campaign in the vain hope that that would bring more Australian tourists to the CNMI.

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Another case of tunnel vision can be found among those administration and government leaders who have decided that the best way to combat a shortage of funds is to step up collection efforts. In the short run - to meet upcoming paydays - there admittedly doesn't seem any other option. But in the longer term, the better solution to the government's chronic shortfall is simply to reduce the size of the payroll.

Unfortunately, no one is willing to take on such an unpopular move. But it is not going to be possible to postpone it forever. Few will deny that the government payroll is bloated. Even in times of plenty, the need to pay excessive personnel costs takes money from useful services and products. When money is scarce, the degree to which services and products suffer because the money is required to meet payroll increases, and could eventually become unacceptable.

The question is, how much in the way of services and products will the people of the CNMI be forced to give up before their leaders admit that the only remaining solution is to reduce the size of the government workforce? Already public school funds and the health care program are being threatened because the government does not have enough money to meet payroll.

Isn't it about time government leaders faced the truth - came out of their tunnel and looked at what was going on around them - and began a serious effort to trim our bloated government? Not in the paintbrush-broad strokes that OPM has tried, but in rational, logical examination of just how many people it takes to change a light bulb, or answer a phone, or make a copy or send a fax, or offer “special assistance” or.....?

Yes, people will lose jobs, and yes, Christmas is coming, but just how many families really need two, or three cars, how many retirees really need an extra income?

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I'm not sure whether it qualifies as tunnel vision or an attempt at spin, or just plain callousness, but the governor himself, in promoting the idea of privatizing the government's health care program, said not only would doing so relieve the NMI Retirement Fund of a heavy financial burden, but it would also "save on the employer's share of the premium contribution." (*Saipan Tribune*, 10/18/02, page 5)

And just how is one supposed to interpret that? Is the governor saying that in privatizing health care, the government would no longer contribute toward its employees' health care insurance? In other words, that all government employees would lose that employment benefit? And that all retirees would as well? Strange advice, from a former health planner.

The irony, of course, is that the NMIRF's "heavy financial burden" stems in large part from the government's failure to pay its share of the health care premiums it owes the NMIRF for its employees and retirees.

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Definitely tunnel vision is the perspective of NMI's Scholarship Advisory Council Board, which announced recently that it will be giving scholarships only to those taking courses "that will allow local students to eventually replace alien workers." Acceptable courses: nursing, health care, accounting, and computer-related courses.

There's a difference between the function of a community college and a scholarship program. It makes sense for a community college to offer courses that meet the needs of the community, and if replacing foreign workers is a community priority, so be it. Not that the CNMI will ever have enough people to replace all its foreign workers.

But scholarship programs should, at the same time, be less restrictive, and more attuned to universal needs. The CNMI may need nurses, accountants, and computer technicians, but it also needs lawyers, doctors, teachers, principals, managers, administrators, and political leaders. Where will its government legislators and leaders come from, if its students are given scholarships primarily for two-year programs, for courses leading to line, as opposed to staff positions?

Scholarship programs should promote and encourage excellence, not political expediency.

