

## On My Mind

2/07/03

The significance of events tends to differ from one culture to another. The recent so-called Benavente trial is a good example. A child, at a gathering of family and friends, was accidentally killed during some casual target shooting. More litigious cultures would have insisted that the wielder of the gun be punished according to the law. In the local culture - influenced in part by the circumstances of small island living - that would serve no useful purpose, would only exacerbate relations among the parties involved.

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The remorse is already there. The reparations - such as might be called for - have already been identified and agreed to. There is nothing to be gained by formal litigation.

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However, cultural differences notwithstanding, several elements of the trial were - and are - cause for concern. Though we all like drama, it seemed cruel and unusual punishment to force the 11-year old playmate to testify in open court. There is no justification for such heartless conduct. The issue isn't really whether it was up to the judge or the defense attorney to demand a closed court. The issue is that such sensationalism, such blatant disregard for a child's sensitivity, does not belong in the court room, and neither the judge nor the attorney should have allowed it.

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The attempt by certain members of the administration - particularly the governor and the Senate president - to intimidate the jury by their presence at the trial, is not justifiable either. It is a flagrant abuse of the separation of powers among the branches of government - of which both the governor and the Senate president should have been well aware. It is particularly unacceptable that the so-called "head of state" would stoop to such unprofessional, undignified, uncalled-for behavior. A head of state is looked to for leadership, for guidance, as mentor. It wasn't provided.

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The lieutenant governor's presence, on the other hand, was justifiable. After all, one of the defendants was his brother.

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It would appear that the breaking of lesser laws - possession of an unregistered gun, shooting while drinking - also occurred, but according to the coconut wireless, evidence provided at the trial was not strong enough to warrant conviction.

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The question remains: why was this case ever brought to court? Aren't there many far more serious cases awaiting prosecution? Where are the government's, the Attorney General's priorities?

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Apparently, the significance of events - or non-events - differs according to the eyes of the beholder. The U.S. President, in his State of the Union speech, again argued that the U.S. is in imminent danger of attack from Iraq, despite the fact that the UN inspection team has found no

proof of Bush's assertion.

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There is a credibility gap here. Are the inspectors so inept that they cannot find the weapons Bush claims the Iraqi have aimed at the U.S.? Or does Bush know something that he is not telling anyone else? It is, of course, not at all clear what determines where the inspection teams go, and in what order. But it is only logical to assume that the team would try to find - as quickly as possible - proof that Iraq is indeed ready to attack the U.S. Once proof was found, there'd be no reason to continue searching (unless one wants to cynically conjecture that the team likes the money it's being paid, and doesn't want its job to end.).

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If Bush knows something decisive, why isn't he sharing it with those world leaders who do not now support his insistence that Iraq be invaded? Why doesn't he share it with those in Congress who do not support him? Why does he not share it with the people?

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Since World War II, the U.S. has faced any number of perceived threats to its security. Except for the infamous Bay of Pigs attempted invasion of Cuba, each has been resolved through means other than war. Bush has not made a good case for why the perceived threat from Iraq - not even in the same hemisphere as the U.S. - should be treated any differently.

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The U.S. has disapproved of the regimes of any number of leaders of other countries. While its covert behind-the-scenes attempts to overturn such leaders have not, in most cases, achieved the desired results, neither have those attempts turned to full-scale war.

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It is, moreover, only natural that Iraq does not appear to be fully cooperating. It is as unreasonable to expect it to do so as it would be to expect a homeowner to meekly open his whole house to detailed inspection by enemy forces. And just as Iraq is not willing to let its scientists be interrogated by the U.S., neither would it be realistic to expect said homeowner to be willing to let his family members be taken out of the house and interrogated elsewhere without a member of the household present.

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The whole scenario is unnatural, unreasonable, grotesque, bizarre. No country with any self-respect would willingly open its borders and allow suspicious foreigners to forage uncontrolled in its every nook and cranny as Iraq is being forced to do. Unfortunately, the U.N., despite its good intentions, has left Iraq with no way of saving face.

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Nor has Bush left himself with a way to save face. solely in order to finish his Daddy's business, some would say, he has painted himself - and thereby the country and all its people - into a corner out of which the only way is war.

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Fortunately, there are others who see things differently than does Bush. One can only hope that their views and perceptions will prevail.

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On a more mundane level, in regard to views and perceptions, some solons and interested parties

are recommending that the location of poker parlors be limited to main roads. Almost by definition, main roads are what all the tourist busses take to wherever they're going. There have been attempts to beautify those main roads, or at least the corners where traffic lights are, with colorful shrubs and flowering plants. Does anyone seriously believe that cluttering up the roads between those traffic lights with garish 24/7 poker parlor signs and billboards will also contribute towards making Saipan a more attractive place to visit?

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Poker parlors should not be located near schools and churches. Single poker machines probably should not be allowed in stores and laundromats. But forcing them all to move to a single area of the island may be carrying things too far. Among other things, it would benefit some landholders, while punishing others. A better solution might be to ban them altogether.

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The speaker's idea of setting aside a common commercial area in future homestead plans makes a lot of sense. The problem, of course, is that homesteads will soon enough become a thing of the past. Fresh ideas are also needed in regard to the very concept of homesteads. Is it time they, too, were abolished altogether?

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I misspelled the originator of the "my country right or wrong" quote last week. It should have been Decatur, not Decator. My apologies, and my thanks to the sharp-eyed reader who pointed out the error.