

On My Mind

2/07/03

Well, we've all had to acknowledge that the Governor is more autocratic than democratic, but going so far as to agree to build him a castle does seem to be carrying things a bit too far. According to an article in this past Tuesday's <I>Tribune</I>, since the building on Capitol Hill formerly occupied by the Division of Lands and Surveys is now empty - having moved to Lower Base - the site - "as proposed by the Department of Lands and Natural Resources...can be designated for the Governor's Palace project."

The paper reports that DLNR Secretary Tom Pangelinan informed the Governor that the vacated space "is a perfect location to construct the state-of-the-art Governor's Palace," that the Governor has already indicated his preference for the place, and that MPLA agrees that it is an ideal place for the Governor's "mansion."

In his letter to the Governor, Pangelinan explained that the new location, being away from a residential area, would provide a more secure setting for the governor's first family, since the present site is surrounded by private properties which puts the governor and his family members at high risk.

Excuse me? In the first place, the coconut wireless indicates that the present governor is not, in fact, in residence at the present governor's residence. Is the problem that it is not palatial enough, and that the governor would stay there if it were more so? I don't think so!

In the second place, the proposed site, while relatively isolated, sits atop a hill and is, therefore, very exposed and highly visible from all directions. Every coming and going would be plainly evident to anyone interested - which is not as true of the present governor's house. Readily accessible as it is from all sides, security would seem to be more difficult at the proposed site than at the present site which has only one entrance, and is all but invisible from most directions.

In the third place, where would the money come from for this palatial, "state-of-the-art" mansion?

The CNMI does not have enough money to keep medicines in stock at CHC, to provide adequate texts to its school students, to pay its share of employee health and pension plans, to pay raises to its employees, to pay the required matching funds for federal grants, and it's going to build a palace for the governor?

In the fourth place, isn't such excessive concern about the security of the CNMI's governor and his family a little out of proportion? The governor may not be performing up to expectations, but that's hardly cause for him to be the target of terrorists, rebels, pirates or any other extremists.

It's not April Fool's Day, so the proposal isn't, apparently, a joke. But it sure ought to be.

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It's nearing income-tax payment time again. With the schedule of repayment of last year's

refunds and rebates now one of the CNMI's longest running not-so-funny jokes, what would happen if people who owed taxes simply deducted last year's refunds from their present tax payment? I haven't seen mention of it anywhere, but it does seem an idea whose time has come.....

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Ellen Goodman, who writes for <I>Boston Globe</I> and is one of my favorite columnists, joined other skeptics earlier this week, in asking whether the purpose of NASA's space program - and in particular its "manned and womanned" orbital shuttles - are worth the cost, risk and sacrifice involved - whether it isn't time to reassess the whole program.

In a column appearing in the <I>Pacific Daily News</I> earlier this week, Goodman said that the only function of the Columbia shuttle that disintegrated on re-entry two weeks ago killing all seven astronauts aboard, appeared to be to conduct a series of experiments - experiments that were far from being either terribly high tech or very important to the world's welfare. Among them: school projects for a 4-H club in California and a science club in Ohio; a project to see if urine could be made into paint, another to see how weightlessness affects harvester ants. Also experiments on creating perfume, improving crop yields, on cell structures and construction materials.

Goodman quotes an MIT professor as saying that all NASA is doing is 'creating excuses to launch human beings into space.' "What we need," she writes, "is a mission worthy of the missionaries."

In light of the excesses in the U.S. budget - and in the budget deficit - it doesn't appear to make a lot of sense for the country to go further into debt just to prove that the U.S. knows how to send people into space. Combating AIDS, combating poverty, curing cancer would seem ever so much more worthwhile targets for those monies.

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While on the subject of budget shortfalls, the CNMI might want to consider a conclusion reached by Hawaii tourist-related agencies recently: that the way to minimize a decline in Japanese tourists - should the U.S. go to war with Iraq - was to emphasize that Hawaii was a safe destination. At a hearing before a Hawaii legislative committee, a spokesperson for the Japanese Travel Bureau told listeners that the way to prepare for war, in terms of tourism, was to reassure the Japanese - whose "mentality is not to visit a country at war"- of Hawaii's safety.

The story was given only brief coverage in yesterday's <I>PDN</I>, with no information on how Hawaii expected to explain the state's safety in view of the presence of several military installations within its borders.

For the CNMI, however, which does not yet have permanent military installations within its borders, the Japanese spokesman's advice makes eminent good sense. The Marianas Visitors

Authority, among others, might want to (gasp!) plan ahead, and begin preparing advertising campaigns aimed at the Japanese market that stress the CNMI's freedom from things military and therefore its (relative) safety. Its claim would make a lot more sense than Hawaii's.

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With the choice of options becoming smaller and smaller, it's probably also high time that the question - of whether judges whose second terms have been rejected by voters can be re-nominated to the bench - be reconsidered. Both former Judge Timothy Bellas and soon-to-be-former Judge Virginia Onerheim remain credible candidates for judgeship. There is nothing in the law that expressly forbids their renomination.

A member of the legal community has pointed out that the Constitution now reads that judges shall <I>initially</I> be appointed by the governor, and that that could cause a problem. It all depends on how the word "initially" is defined. It could as easily refer to the first term of any appointment - be it the first, second, or third - as to only the first time a particular person is nominated.

The Speaker has said that the provision calling for voter confirmation of a judge's second term should be given more time. But in the meantime, the CNMI is losing the benefit of not only judicial experience, but also of sound and experienced legal minds on the bench. What a waste!