

On My Mind

2/07/03

It may sound ghoulish, but it's been a relief of sorts to see stories related to the Columbia disaster on the front pages, instead of Bush's relentless propaganda in support of a pre-emptive strike against Iraq. It's been frustrating, though, to see so little hard data in those stories. Yes, the media has had to scramble to provide coverage, but nonetheless, there are a number of details that should have been easy to come by that have not yet been reported.

For example: how long had the Columbia been in space? How many orbits of earth had it made? What was supposed to its mission? To what extent were the results of the experiments the team had done in space lost? Wasn't any of the data transmitted back to earth? If not, why not?

It has been said that if indeed one or more tiles were damaged by the now-infamous piece of insulation that fell off during lift-off, no repair would have been possible - with only a slight chance that tilting the space ship during descent might have enabled the Columbia to land intact. Was there no back-up plan? If detected early enough, could the Columbia have changed course and docked at the space station?

The loss of the seven astronauts - not to mention the shuttle - is a harsh and costly reminder that there can never be too much planning and "what-if" analysis, too much redundancy and back-up, too much care and caution (imagine using the oldest shuttle, the next to the last old-style fuel tank!) in carrying out missions of such immense risk.

War against Iraq would seem to pose a similar risk. The question is whether Bush and his war hawks will take the lesson to heart.

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It may sound cold-hearted to wonder why the death of a mere seven individuals should be treated as a tragedy of such enormity. Granted, the community of astronauts is very small, and hence the loss of seven of them all the more significant. Granted that astronauts are heroes of a sort - breaking new ground and setting new records with almost every venture into space. Granted that it was a heartbreaking end - so close to home to not have made it. And granted that their loss represents a loss of millions of dollars - not only for their training and outfits, but also for such things as their equipment and the construction of the shuttle and its operation and maintenance.

But does this mean that only heroes, only those in whom a lot has been invested, only those who are members of select groups, deserve such attention on their demise? What about fighter pilots who collide in mid-air? Or the crews of military helicopters that crash - or also occasionally collide in mid-air? What about the individual members of the military who have been killed in Afghanistan?

On the same day as the shuttle disaster, my daughter reported that seven people had lost their lives in a landslide in Jakarta. What about them?

For the families of the seven, it is a tragedy of major proportions. And their grief is to be fully and totally respected. But for the rest of the world, the grief might better be expressed in terms of a greater humanity: grief for all who die braving new horizons, grief for all who die in service to their country, grief for all who die unnatural deaths.

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One example of Bush's relentless propaganda: the story on the front page of this past Tuesday's <I>Tribune</I> describing the training, in preparation for war with Iraq, that is being given to U.S. military in an attempt to minimize the killing of civilians. The article says that soldiers are being confronted with targets of different shapes or colors - designating "enemy" or "civilian" - and must learn to distinguish between the two.

The article points out that the distinction may be difficult to maintain because reports say that Saddam Hussein is arming civilians. And of course, the article says, a soldier's top priority must be to protect his or her own life.

In other words, be prepared, dear reader, for the killing of civilians in the war on Iraq. Consider yourself forewarned that it will not be due to carelessness or lack of preparation on the part of the U.S. military, but to Hussein's dirty tricks.....

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If the CNMI feels it, too, must benefit from impending war, it might consider a more benign form of participation than the establishment of military bases here, or the home-porting of ships, or the sacrifice of more land for military training purposes. Since its major industry is tourism, it would be more appropriate and fitting to offer itself as the "R&R" (Rest and Recreation) destination for the military, instead.

With the increased build-up of military personnel in Guam, the CNMI could advertise itself as the quiet, peaceful, beautiful and friendly respite from the rigors of military life and, in particular, the stress of training for war. The CNMI, given its location, could also provide R&R to troops in the Middle East, and to ships crews that are stationed in the area of the Arab peninsula.

Providing R&R for the military could provide the necessary impetus to move both the prostitution "business" and the poker parlors to a separate area away from family-oriented attractions. It certainly would be easier to police and regulate them if they were restricted to a particular location.

It might finally provide the impetus to the various hotels on Saipan to allow non-guests to also use their buses for the trip from airport to Garapan or Susupe and back, for tours to Banzai and

Suicide Cliffs, etc. Those buses always have empty seats. It shouldn't be all that difficult to come up with a system for allowing others to take advantage of the bus routes for a moderate fee. (It could be to the hotels' advantage to allow others to ride their buses - for a reasonable fare - in any case.)

And it just might provide the impetus to everyone involved to take tourism more seriously. To keep the beaches clean. To keep the restrooms at tourist sites open, clean, functioning and free of graffiti. To work towards restoring the health of the lagoon, its reef and fishes. To add tourist activities that aren't dependent on the sun - that can be done even in the rain. To ensure tourist participation in local events such as the Flame Tree/May Arts Festival, music society performances, museum exhibit openings, village fiestas.

If CNMI leaders insist the CNMI should "join the war effort," let it be in a manner that brings long term benefits to all of us.

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Proposing that the Saipan Municipal Council should be given powers to pass ordinances, as is called for in House Legislative Initiative 13-9, would seem to go against the grain. With such powers, the Municipal Council will need increased staff, including an attorney to ensure that its ordinances are legitimate, officers to enforce the ordinances, and clerks to maintain a record of ordinances passed, etc.

In a time of economic hardship, adding jobs - and therefore additional expenses - to government is counterproductive, especially since the called-for functions are already being performed by others. Local laws - pertaining to a single senatorial district, such as Saipan - are the responsibility of the local delegation, made up of the members of the legislature from that district. Enforcement is up to the Department of Public Safety. There would seem to be no need for a second mechanism to either write or enforce laws relating to a single district.

Rather than adding complexity to the legal infrastructure, wouldn't it be better to simplify it, and abolish the municipal councils altogether?