

On My Mind
5/16/03

One has to, I suppose, give credit to Stephen Woodruff, attorney to beleaguered Senator-in-limbo Ricardo S. Atalig, for the ingenious arguments that have been offered up as to why Atalig isn't really guilty, despite his conviction in federal court. The latest mumbo-jumbo claims that Atalig didn't violate the public trust in his exercise of responsibilities as a senator, since it was only a matter of his exercise of discretion.

According to a story in the <I>Tribune</I> earlier this week, Atalig, in a resignation letter, claims that his responsibilities as a senator include "establishing policy, enacting legislation or performing oversight of executive branch operations." These he did not violate, he claims. The actions in question were only in "carrying out his authority as senator relative to senate employment and expenditure of funds allotted to his office." Moreover those actions do not constitute a crime under CNMI law, and violated no rule of the Senate, he claims.

There is, however, something unseemly in all the manipulations, legal maneuvers, and verbal shenanigans exhibited by Atalig, and through him, by Woodruff. The jury reached a decision. It can only be overturned through the court system. Anything else is a waste of time and money.

If Atalig wants to retain any dignity of office at all, he might better let the law take its course and stop offering further proof that as far as responsible expenditure of funds is concerned, he still isn't doing very well at exercising discretion.

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Though Congressman Stanley T. Torres is often to be admired for his willingness to take on issues that others are afraid to touch, his proposal to legalize casino gambling on Saipan does not fall into that category. Granted, there is a need to generate more revenue. Granted that in other states, casino gambling does seem to pull in the dollars. But there is a major difference between those states and the CNMI - most of their customers are within driving distance, whereas CNMI's customers would have to come from off-island, from foreign countries.

As should be clear from the example set by Tinian's casino, customer attendance is heavily dependent on factors totally outside local control - such unpredictable things as a typhoon, a foreign nation's economy, the war in Iraq, the SARS epidemic. In fact, Tinian's casino has yet to turn a profit, five years after it opened. Granted, the Tinian Dynasty suffered from the too-short runways of Tinian's airport. But even now, as the airport runways finally near completion, the SARS threat still lingers. And how long will it take the Dynasty to recoup its losses?

It does not make sense to create a competitor for a business that cannot yet be declared truly successful. One has to give credit to the Dynasty for keeping its doors open throughout the five long years it has awaited the elongation of Tinian's runways, but even so, it is not yet a profit-making venture. With no proof that one casino can make money, there doesn't seem to be a lot of logic in opening a second one.

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The idea of opening a gambling casino on Saipan, not to mention one or more gun resorts, while the Marianas Visitors Authority, the Marianas Hotel Association, and various executive agencies are doing their best to promote the CNMI as a safe, family-oriented destination - and are vowing to clean up Garapan besides - doesn't make a lot of sense either.

There may be an element of the Japanese tourist market that is gun-oriented, to whom gun resorts would be an attraction, but how does the size of that portion compare to other portions (office ladies, families, older people) of the market, who would find gun resorts unacceptable? Is it really cost-effective to cater to the gun-oriented sector at the expense of the others?

To what extent will catering to the gambling sector of the tourist market offend office ladies, families, older people - those other portions of the market that the CNMI is focusing on, and for whom extensive and ambitious plans are being made to make the CNMI a safe and attractive destination? Is it really cost-effective to cater to the gambling sector at the expense of the others?

Moreover, what effect will catering to foreign gun and gambling interests have on the local community, on island residents? To begin with, there's already wide-spread proof that introducing gambling has been devastating to local families. Casino advocates argue that locals will not be allowed to gamble. But if not locals, where will enough patrons come from to make the venture profitable? And while gun-resort advocates argue that tight security measures will keep guns from being stolen, especially in this climate, that claim is simply not realistic.

It is not only the presence of the casino or the shooting resorts per se that ought to be of concern, but also the presence of those who do the gambling and shoot the guns, those who operate the premises, and the attitudes, the outlook, of people who think such activities are harmless.

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There is no question that revenue generation is needed, but the answer does not lie in casinos or shooting resorts. The answer lies much closer to home. It's high time the members of the legislature did a reality check, and cut back some of their extravagant allowances and allotments. It's high time that the legislature and the executive branch agencies - with the exception of DPH, DPS, PSS - trimmed their staffs. It's high time legislators earned their pay and passed the Retirement Fund reform measures.

The answer to our economic problems does not lie in increasing revenue. It lies in cutting expenditures. It does not lie so much in the nickel-and-diming of turning off lights and cutting work hours as it does in cutting the size of government - cutting all those illegal overly-generous salaries, cutting over-generous retirement benefits, cutting the dead wood that performs no function but nonetheless collects a salary, even, perhaps, cutting the number of members of the House of Representatives.

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Efforts are apparently underway to protect tourists on our beaches from overly aggressive beach-boys trying to sell everything from banana boat rides to trips to Managaha. Another site that bears looking at is the Garapan JoeTen store. Not only have instant tattoo and costume jewelry vendors begun accosting tourists on their way to and from the JoeTen store, but other “shills” stop tourists there as well - handing out flyers and other printed information in non-English languages (presumably Korean and Japanese, but since I can’t read either, I can only guess) for who knows what kinds of deals, services or alleged attractions.

The JoeTen company has always been aggressive in its solicitation of the tourist market, but the gauntlet tourists now have to run outside its Garapan store strikes me as being self-defeating. For one, do any of those vendors have business licenses? Could it be that JoeTen gets a cut of whatever sales are made?

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One might almost think that some wrathful Chamolinian god was behind the Anatahan eruption, wreaking vengeance for the Marianas Public Land Authority’s arrogance in negotiation use of the island with the U.S. Navy without consulting anyone else, without even exacting a quid pro quo for the Navy’s use of CNMI public land.

Perhaps that wrathful god was also chiding the MPLA - and the office of the mayor of the Northern Islands - for holding out the unrealistic hope that homesteads could be developed on Anatahan?