

On My Mind

9/26/03

*<i>Clarification: The comment, in my last column, that perhaps politics are involved in the delay of a decision in the Ricardo Atalig case, was intended to question how and to whom the case was assigned, not the integrity of the judge to whom the case was assigned. I've since been informed that outside of the "regular" cases in Superior Court - criminal to Judge Wiseman, traffic to Judge Lizama, family to Judge Govendo, etc. - cases are assigned arbitrarily, in the Clerk's office.</i>*

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Tsunami! This is the only the second time, in the past 23 years, that I can recall a tsunami alert being called (there may have been one more?). Then, too, people were still being urged to evacuate long after the threat had passed. And, of course, then, too, the tsunami did not come.

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There is no record of a tsunami ever having hit the CNMI. There is no word for it in either of the local languages. The topography of the seabed outside our shores is simply not conducive to the formation of a tsunami - unlike Hawaii, for instance, where tsunamis do occur.

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Of course, it doesn't pay to take chances. But even if one believed that a tsunami would hit Saipan, can any one seriously believe that it would have hit Northern Marianas College, perched up on the hill in As Terlaje? So why did NMC shut down? Can anyone seriously believe that a tsunami would tear through the former Diamond Hotel, and hit the Nauru building? So why did the entire judicial complex shut down?

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It was Friday, a friend tells me. People are always looking for an excuse to make three-day week-ends. But what a colossal waste of money! And what a disruption!

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Isn't it about time that the CNMI government develop a more realistic understanding of and policy towards tsunami threats?

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Well, NMC's glib silver-tongued orator is at it again. Now he's saying that he doesn't really want an \$8 million loan from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, as had originally been reported. He only wants the USDA to guarantee a loan - for \$5 million.. But where is the loan to come from? NMC has already made the rounds of banking institutions seeking funding for its Gateway project, and found no takers. And why \$3 million less? Was the first figure an exaggeration?

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Since when is the USDA in the banking business anyway? And why would the Department of Agriculture fund a project to teach English as a second language to Asian students, even if it were? There doesn't seem to be any connection between the two.

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That's not all. According to Wednesday's *<I>Variety</I>*, NMC's President is claiming that

mainland colleges are interested in accepting students who have “participated” in the Gateway project. Dr. Knight is quoted as saying that such students will have two years to process their visa applications, but it is not at all clear what standing those students will have after two years. Does that mean the Gateway project is a two-year program? (Interestingly, that has never been defined, so far as I know.) Will they have earned an AA? Will they merely be ready to start an English language-based institution?

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And what does it say about NMC, and it’s supposed function as a community college for the people of the CNMI, when its president touts the acceptance of foreign students to mainland colleges, without ever having addressed the acceptance of island students to mainland institutions?

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CNMI Council on Development Disabilities Executive Director Thomas J. Camacho does a commendable job of promoting the interests of those with developmental disabilities in the CNMI. Nonetheless, it would appear that, in the case of the Help America Vote Act of 2002, Camacho has lost his perspective.

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HAVA, according to a report in Wednesday’s <I>Tribune</I>, would have provided the CNMI with up to \$1 million in assistance to upgrade technology used in voting in federal elections, and to administer federal election laws and programs. The law also provides funding to states and territories to enable them to assure access, in federal elections, to polling places to those with disabilities, to assure that people with disabilities can participate in the voting process itself, and to train election officials, as well as funding to state protection and advocacy systems to ensure full participation in the voting process to individuals with disabilities.

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The kicker, of course, is that the CNMI does not conduct any federal elections. Guam, American Samoa, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands are all eligible for HAVA funds because they conduct elections, considered to be federal, for their non-voting delegate to the U.S. Congress.

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Camacho could have turned this into yet another reason why the CNMI should press for approval from the U.S. Congress of a non-voting delegate to Washington. However - at least according to the account in the paper - he has instead embarked on a campaign to try change the law so that the CNMI can also receive funding under HAVA - even if it doesn’t conduct federal elections - and has asked the Washington Rep’s office to assist him in the effort.

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While it might be nice to have those extra funds provided by HAVA, they don’t really seem all that essential. From all appearances, the Election Board already provides all necessary assistance to people with disabilities who wish to vote. Besides, in order to qualify for HAVA funding, the CNMI would also be required to establish a State Plan Development and Coordinating Committee, and to develop a voting State Plan of the Northern Marianas. In other words, to add yet another federal regulatory bureaucracy to the CNMI’s roster.

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On the other hand, if federal monies for elections were to come to the CNMI, maybe getting

federal observers to monitor elections would be a lot easier. Of course, they probably wouldn't be able to monitor the mid-term elections - as has been requested for this year's mid-term elections - since the Washington Rep is elected only during the gubernatorial elections.

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While I'm happy for Serui Singeru, the Palauan bus driver who won Red Cross Shanghai Nights' top prize of \$25,000, I am also concerned about how much he will benefit from that award.

Micronesian society being what it is, it is a foregone conclusion that relatives he didn't know he had will now come to him, asking - perhaps even demanding - that he share his good fortune.

And being Micronesian, he will in all likelihood, be unable to say no.

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The wise handling of large amounts of cash presents a challenge to even the most informed of investors, particularly in today's market. For Micronesians, for whom familiarity with a cash economy, checking and savings accounts, investments, and the like, is often still spotty and shallow, the handling of large amounts of cash is far more daunting.

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Nor are there investment counselors available, who could provide input and guidance to people with large amounts to invest - be it from lotteries, selling land, a successful business, or what-have-you. Like Singeru, they are left on their own, to figure it out as best they can. Too often, this results in grandiose spending for a while, followed by despair and depression, as they become aware that the money has disappeared, and they have little to show for where it went.

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It would be nice if banks - as monetary institutions - had a program of assisting those like Singeru, who unexpectedly come into large amounts of money. It should be done as a <I>pro bono</I> service to the community. Or perhaps the sources of such funds - like the Tinian Dynasty, and yes, the Red Cross, could institute such a program.

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The need for this may have been greater at one time, but it is still there.

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An accident waiting to happen sits at the cross-walk between the JoeTen shopping center in Susupe and the New World hotel across the street. Drivers coming on to Beach Road from the Nauru Building get a green light (assuring them it's ok to turn right) at the same time that pedestrians get a "safe" walking signal, assuring them it's ok to cross Beach Road. Turning right, at that point, is to run into the pedestrians crossing the street. That light should be <b>red</b> when the pedestrian safe crossing signal is on!

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Last but not least, THANK-YOU, <I>Tribune</I>, for publishing "Capsule reviews of current [movie] releases,"(which appeared on page 39 in today's edition). It will be both informative and interesting to see how many of those films ever come to Saipan. Hopefully, the <I>Trib</I> will continue to run this helpful page, which, in turn, will eventually lead to sufficient public

pressure on Hollywood Theaters management to bring in more of the better films out there.