

## On My Mind

10/15/04

This past Sunday was not only Rota's fiesta day , but also Tanapag's. Yet there was not a word in the papers to acknowledge this. Nor was there a single picture. And that's a pity on more than one score - Tanapag village has rebuilt its church tower, and in the process, redecorated and repainted the entire church, complete with red brick trim, making it a lovely sight to behold, and yet there wasn't a single picture of it, much less of the people at the fiesta.

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It has, of course, long been a sore point that the Bishop never comes to the Tanapag fiesta - one would think that in all fairness, he would rotate attendance from one year to the next. But being completely ignored by the press as well? Pretty sad.

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Then on Monday, Columbus Day was observed (I won't say celebrated). I thought the comment on the holiday by Jaime Vergara most intriguing. Wrote Vergara in Monday's *Tribune* , "Too bad we have reduced this festive occasion [in]to its ethnic component of Italian pride rather than the celebration of the human spirit on its quest to go beyond borders and horizons where no man nor woman ha[s] gone before." Columbus, he said, "ushered [in] the flowering of maritime technology, enticing Europe to literally assault the rest of the world, and creating various fronts of brave new worlds."

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In other words, what should be celebrated on Columbus Day is the vision and bravery, fortitude and persistence of Columbus himself, as well as of the human race in general. He worked tirelessly to obtain the funding for boats and crew and supplies. He courageously overcame the fears and superstitions prevalent at the time. He was able to persuade others of his dream of a new world beyond the horizon. And he "stayed the course" until he reached land - not the land he expected, but landfall nonetheless.

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It was a truly heroic act - the first of many in the course of the exploration of the universe, but his was a very important and distinctive feat. Rather than remembering him as the "discoverer" of America, as history has labeled him, how much better to remember him as the first in a line of intrepid explorers that continues to this day. Thanks, Jaime!

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Howard Willens and Deanne Siemer, authors of both "An Honorable Accord" about the formation of the Covenant, and "National Security and Self-Determination" which describes the events leading up to that process, tell many a fascinating story about their varied past experiences and present research projects. The couple, who are both attorneys, have, between them, assisted in the birth of the Commonwealth, surveyed Peace Corps operations, experienced the inner workings of the Defense Department, and visited numerous presidential libraries, among other things. Many of these stories were recounted during their recent stay on island, but the one I found most intriguing was the one about a presidential directive issued by President Ford that was never implemented.

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The story goes that former Ambassador Haydn Williams, involved in negotiations to forge an agreement between the U.S. and what was then the Marianas District, became concerned about the status of nearby Guam, through which he passed every time he came to Saipan. He raised the question with then Congressman Phillip Burton, and Guam's then delegate to the House of Representatives, Antonio Won Pat.

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Eventually, agreement was reached that Guam's status should also be dealt with, and that there was no reason it should not have a status similar to that being forged for the Marianas. The recommendation was brought before the U.S. president - at the time, Richard M. Nixon - and a presidential directive was drawn up to give Guam the same status as was being given to the Marianas. Unfortunately, the directive arrived at the president's desk for his signature the very day that Nixon resigned from office.

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Some time later, it was signed by President Ford, but by then various agencies within the executive branch had become more than a little concerned about the advantageous terms being written into the Covenant by the Marianas negotiation team, at the time ably assisted by counsel Howard Willens. They were reluctant to see the same provisions applied to Guam, and - as bureaucracies are wont to do - managed to bury the directive - never to have it surface again.

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But according to the couple, there is no statute of limitations for presidential directives.

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Willens and Siemer have written a book about their discovery - publication of which is expected late this year. In the meantime, it will be interesting to see how Guam reacts to the find. Will the issue immediately bog down in partisan politics - of which there are few better practitioners than Guam's politicians? Or will there be an effort to consider the matter in a bi-partisan, impartial manner and setting and to plan a strategy that is reasoned, deliberate, and rational?

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In follow-up to last week's statement about the fallacy of depending on printed news for information, I should like to point out that it is a problem not only in the CNMI. For example, newswire stories - as carried in the local papers - of the recent private sector effort to launch a spaceship described, in the account of the first trip, the "wheelies" that occurred as the spaceship headed back to earth, and identified the pilot who experienced them. A subsequent story wondered whether those wheelies would occur on the second attempt, and whether the same pilot would be taking the spaceship up again. The final story, at the successful completion of the second flight, mentioned neither the name of the pilot, nor was any mention made of the behavior of the spaceship on its trip back to earth - leaving me a very frustrated reader!

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It's possible the newswire stories were edited to fit into available space in the local papers, but whether the fault lay with the newswires or the local editors, here again is an example of incomplete information given to the public.

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Another is the failure of either the Attorney General's office or the print media to make available to the public so much as a list of the contents of the <i>Commonwealth Register</i>. This

government publication comes out monthly, and contains proposed rules and regulations - that the public is entitled to comment upon within 30 days of publication - as well as notices of adoption of rules and regulations, emergency declarations and other public notices. Yet neither the office of the Attorney General nor the print media deem it necessary to inform the public of even the *Register* table of contents - one is expected to call the AG's office to learn whether the *Register* has been published (its date varies from month to month) and is then expected to traipse to the AG's office on Capital Hill and read the table of contents there to determine whether this month's issue contains anything of relevance to the inquirer's interests. (I've been told that the table of contents had been sent to me via e-mail - on two occasions - but not having received either one, I confess I remain skeptical.)

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What is the solution? How does one obtain information? How does one determine its accuracy? Though there are also radio news stations and tv news broadcasts (local and national), there is no guarantee that what is learned through those channels is any more trustworthy - or impartial. For those fortunate enough to have access to the internet and the skills to search it, there are far more sources, but the challenge still is: how to tell fact from fiction.

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Locally, a good beginning would be to teach students to read newspapers critically, to help them learn how to judge the validity of a story and its sources. It goes against the non-confrontational custom of the culture, but another useful strategy is to ask questions - of leaders, speakers, reporters - yes, even of teachers. And all should call on newsmakers to exercise their responsibility to the public, and to provide complete stories and not just half-truths, or superficial truths.

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It is, in effect, up to everyone involved - the public who receives the information, the leaders who provide it, the media who deliver it - to strive for more complete, more accurate, information, and more of it.

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Also in follow-up to last week's column, I should note that there is a web site at which much information related to the telecommunications commission can be found *(nmictc.com)*, about which I had forgotten. While it is an orderly, and ordered site, it is not very user friendly, in that no subject access is provided. A search for references to the cable issue involves opening one file after another - and I confess I just gave up after a while. However, Adam Turner, the commission's executive director, has just informed me (a) that all public commission documents are listed, and (b) the key document at this point is the "settlement agreement." More next week.....

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Last but not least in this wonderful world of wordgames: The Governor's proposed Integrated Fiscal Plan includes a decrease in rebates and an increase in motor vehicle fees. Yet the claim is made that implementing the plan would not involve any new taxes. A cut in rebates and an increase in motor vehicle fees aren't tax increases? What else should one call them?

