

On My Mind
11/05/04

(To those who missed last week's column, my apologies. The service provider was changing servers, and problems with incompatible coding delayed the uploading of the column. But it is still available in the "Archives." Just click on the "Archives" to your left, and then click on last week's date, which would have been 10/29/04. The column also appears in each Sunday's Saipan Tribune, which is on-line at "saipantribune.com.")

While some may be jubilant about Bush's victory, there are at least an equal number - myself included - who are deeply dismayed and disappointed, and fearful as well of the consequences over the next four years. But once the shock and the grief wear off - perhaps even to hasten their diminishing - there is a critical challenge for Kerry supporters, for the Democratic Party, to take on: reaching out. The infamous map of red and blue states makes it very obvious: there are clear, tight, and contiguous physical boundaries separating those supporting Bush from those who supported Kerry. There is the western border - all blue, and the north-northeast corner - all blue. But the greater "middle America" is all red.

It does not really matter how one defines the differences. They are there, and they are stark. If those who supported Kerry, and Democratic party members, wish to win the next election, they will have to go out and convince a broader segment of the population that the Kerry/Democratic banner is worth supporting. (While Kerry had to be a "party animal" in order to campaign as a Democrat, I feel a need to make a distinction between his supporters - many of whom, for the first time, actively worked a political campaign - and the perhaps less idealistic seasoned old-time party members.) They will have to discuss, persuade, explain, educate, middle America about tax issues, about environmental issues, about international policy issues, about monetary issues - complex matters to be sure, but essential to a better understanding of the differences between Bush and Kerry, between, if you will, Democrats and Republicans.

Perhaps if the outreach campaign is done separately from the immediacy of elections, it will be easier to stick to the subject, to not get distracted by political foggery. And while mention of Michael Moore might well turn some people off, he did make some excellent suggestions in the next to last chapter of his book, *Dude, Where's My Country?* about how to talk with the more conservative middle Americans. I know I am going to copy them out, and carry them with me.

In the meantime, we can take heart in the fact that more people than ever got involved in campaigning this year, and went to the polls. That, at least, is a beginning.

More ominous in the short run is the fate of the CNMI's garment industry as described by guest speakers at the Chamber of Commerce's monthly meeting held at the Hyatt's Sand Castle earlier this week. A phased multi-fiber agreement reached some ten years ago by the World Trade Organization's predecessor, GATT, (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) to end the global

textile and apparel quota system expires on January 1, 2005. With the expiration of the quota system, there will be no restrictions, no import quotas, for such goods among the 148 WTO members. Countries will be allowed to export - and consumer countries must allow, with few exceptions, the import of - all textiles and garments covered under the WTO agreement. The competitive edge that the CNMI had, in not having to meet a quota for imports to the U.S., will no longer exist. Large garment producers, such as India and China, will now be able to compete with the garment manufacturers in the CNMI on an equal footing - so far as quotas are concerned, as of January 1, 2005.

There is a cushion between 2005 and 2008 - during that period, countries can impose what are called "safeguard" quotas if they can prove that their domestic market is threatened by the removal of all quotas. Petitions are underway in the U.S. to ask the Committee for the Implementation of Textile Agreements (CITA) to place a quota on garments - by garment category, such as trousers - imported by China, despite the WTO 1/1/2005 deadline for such quotas. But even that option - to place a quota on China goods if they disrupt the U.S. market or threaten to - expires four years from January.

It is predicted that China will, in a very short time, produce fully 80% of all clothing world-wide, since the raw material, the infrastructure, and the labor to support the industry are readily accessible, in place. In comparison, the CNMI's labor costs are much higher, though its present labor pool is trained and experienced. And while it does still have duty-free status for its imports to the U.S. mainland, that is not enough to be competitive, said Douglas Rogers of Polo Ralph Lauren, who spoke representing a vendor's point of view at the CoC meeting.

What will be needed to allow the CNMI's garment industry to survive - and survival is important not only to the garment industry but also to the CNMI, since the garment industry provides more than 30% of CNMI's revenue - is a continuation of the present minimum wage for the industry, as well as continuation of the present schedule of fees and taxes. In addition, said James Lin, chairman of the Saipan Garment Manufacturers Association, the industry needs a change in the added-value ratio that allows garments to enter the U.S. duty-free. At present, there must be a 50% increase in value added to a garment for such eligibility. Lin said this should be reduced to 30% to enable island manufacturers to be more competitive. The change requires approval from the U.S. - and apparently the CNMI is already involved in a lobbying effort for this change in the U.S. Congress.

Rex Kosack, former CNMI Attorney General, and former Trade Counsel, opened the session with a cogent overview of how garment factories came to be established in the CNMI, and of the efforts that had been made by past administrations to keep them here. Providing background information on the WTO textile agreement and its provisions, Kosack closed by observing that the CNMI's garment industry, which Lin had called a "sunset industry," had survived due to the wise stewardship within the industry, and supportive government regulations. The implication was clear: only by continued support by the government will the industry last beyond 2005.

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And speaking of helping things survive....National Public Radio's semi-annual fund raiser - which also includes our local station, KRNM - ended last week. The grand total number of pledges received by the station as of the end of the campaign - are you ready for this? - was 27! That is not only disgraceful, but truly embarrassing, not to mention depressing. Station Manager Carl Pogue, in his solicitation of funds, repeats several times a day, that even a \$5.00 pledge will help. After all, he has to justify his budget to NMC, and the number of listeners who care enough to support the station are a critical element in that report. Yet there weren't more than 27 people willing to pledge even five dollars in support of such unique and enjoyable programs as "Car Talk," "Jazz on the Seventh Day," "Echoes," "BBC World News," "All Things Considered," "Performance Today," "Justice Talking," or "World Café"? Unbelievable!!!

KRNM is a listener-supported station, featuring local shows as well as network shows from National Public Radio, and Public Radio International. It is also a commercial-free radio station. And it airs a truly eclectic assortment of programs - varied enough to suit all tastes. KRNM was not always available on Saipan. It only began six years ago. Before that, none of those programs were available. All we had was commercial radio - a pretty thin diet.

Though the formal pledge drive soliciting support has now ended, it is not too late to show support. Pledges can be called in to Carl at 234-5766, his cell phone at 484-2385, or mailed in to CRM/NMC, P.O. Box 501250, Saipan, MP 96950. Want those programs to continue? Then do your share, and support them!

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Something else that needs saving, in my opinion, is the tropical appeal of the island of Saipan. Tourists who come here supposedly come for the sun, sea and sky - at least that's what all the brochures say - and for the peace and tranquillity that tropical islands represent in most people's imagination.

Yet the view of Saipan's horizon is far from one of peace and tranquillity. Rather, it is a view that calls to mind images of war, battles, the armaments and accoutrements of military conflict. Though some may argue that the ships represent security, even that concept is alien to the idea of peace and tranquillity on a tropical island. And what's worse, the presence of those pre-positioning behemoths out there on the horizon has gone from one to four - and now it is said that as many as ten may come and anchor here.

It is true that they provide income to the CNMI. It is true that the CNMI needs an alternate source of revenue, what with the near-certain demise of its garment industry. But in the first place, it doesn't make much sense to me to add one element (those pre-positioning ships) at the cost of another (tourists). And in the second place, there must be lots of other places those ships can anchor and achieve the same purpose. To allow them to anchor just outside the Saipan Lagoon, in full view of all of Saipan's tourist beaches, is counterproductive, to say the least.

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One last note: Citizenship Day needs saving, too! Did you notice it going by unheralded???

