

On My Mind
11/12/04

The funny punctuation that has plagued this column for the last few weeks has been due to the fact that up-grading the code used to input the column, necessitated by Saipan.com's switch to a new server, had not been completed, rather than to any lapse of mine.

If one reads broadly enough, one will find considerable variety in the "post mortems" being offered on why Kerry did not win, and what it means for the U.S. over the next four years. Many of them are as one-sided as was the political propaganda used during the campaign, but many other discussions of what happened and why and what it means have been more balanced and objective.

The articles have reported that there were flaws in Kerry as a candidate, flaws in the way the campaign was conducted, in the points that were made over and over, in the points that were never made but should have been - all of which are true. They've also noted that Bush is now, after all, a "lame duck" president, and many in his shoes have not done well in their second term.

Time will tell. And they've reported that the Democrats will have to do some serious re-thinking about where they stand and how to let others know that, which is also true.

Perhaps the most important point that comes across, though, is that, as one long-time reader of this column has expressed it, "I'm looking at all the states as purple....There isn't one state that is all red or all blue. Perhaps in the electoral college but not in the population." In other words, the states are made up of individual voters, and an overall outcome of 51% to 49% means that nearly half of all who cast their ballot voted one way and a little over half of them voted the other. Despite the appearance of the red vs blue map, it isn't, and wasn't, a question of an overwhelming majority on one side or the other.

The point is important because it belies the Republican assertion that the election results give them a mandate to carry out their program. It does not. It gives them a slight edge, but a 2% lead is not a mandate. The Republicans and Bush have already begun to put that spin on the outcome, but they should not be allowed to perpetuate that belief, that interpretation. It simply is not true. How can it be countered? Perhaps we should all begin wearing purple ribbons!

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I should like to note, before leaving the subject, that while I am not a Bush supporter, I would have been very sorry to see Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Office of Insular Affairs David Cohen leave his position, as apparently he would have been expected to do should Kerry have won. In contrast to those who have held similar positions in the past, Cohen has been an unusually concerned, informed and supportive Interior Department "envoy" to the CNMI. Unless, by some stroke of luck, he had been allowed to continue under Kerry, the CNMI would indeed have suffered from his departure from office.

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On the “home” front, the biggest controversy at the moment seems to be about CUC's intention to pass on to consumers at least a portion of the ever-higher cost of fuel. I do not know to what extent agencies are compelled to accept - and act upon - the input provided at public hearings, but if the public hearing on the issue held in Susupe earlier this week is any indication, CUC will be hard pressed to impose anything but a very limited increase on its customers to cover its increasing fuel costs. No one I heard (I left a little early) supported the increase as proposed.

CUC has proposed regulations to cover imposition of a fuel surcharge, and has held public hearings to gather comments on the draft regulations. Unfortunately, however, the hearing I attended was conducted rather amateurishly, which severely limited its usefulness. No time limits were established, allowing speakers to ramble on and on, often very off-point, which deprived others of an opportunity to speak. The chairman, who conducted the hearing, was not forceful enough, and did not remind speakers that the purpose of the hearing was to discuss the surcharge, not the general operation of CUC. Nor did the chairman himself stay within the boundaries of a hearing, subjecting himself and his staff to the ordeal of having to try answer sometimes meaningless and other times rather hostile questions when the purpose of the meeting was to receive public input on the proposed regulations, rather than to carry on a dialogue with the public.

As for the issue itself, I stand by my earlier statement that in principle I believe CUC is justified in passing on at least a part of the fuel surcharge to its customers. The increase in fuel costs was not expected, it was not budgeted, and it is not under CUC's control. We allow everyone else to pass on the increase, through higher prices at the gas pump to higher prices in the stores. Why should not CUC, too, be allowed to increase its prices?

It may be true, as some who spoke at the hearing argued, that CUC could be more efficiently operated, and that different generators, different fuels, different fuel sources could reduce costs significantly. But that is beside the point. Such changes would take months, if not years, to bring about. The issue is the increase in fuel costs that is being charged CUC right now.

Having said that, it is, nonetheless, also true - which no one mentioned - that the timing could not be worse. Increasing CUC rates just in time for Christmas? How mean-spirited can one be? And “hiding” the fact that the 3.5% increase is only temporary - in that a 5% increase is to be expected in January - is even less acceptable. Moreover, that CUC has not been forthcoming - was not open and honest - about this has only served to increase the anger and frustration of its customers, rather than gain their support. And it is also true that users of more than 2001 kilowatts per hour, with no limits on the surcharge they can be charged, are the biggest losers of all.

Most frustrating, however, is the fact that no solution has been found for the fact that the government, not only a significant consumer, but also perhaps the most wasteful consumer (just think about all government's frigid offices - the multi-purpose center being no exception), does not pay its bills. Ordinarily, raising prices might encourage conservation. But when the customer doesn't pay its bills to begin with, that doesn't work.

In terms of solution to the dilemma, I would offer two suggestions. First of all, the law should

be temporarily waived, so that CUC could gradually phase in the increase over a number of months. At present, CUC may only increase the rate 2¢ per year, which does not give it sufficient flexibility. And secondly, perhaps there is a way that the rate increase could be made conditional upon CUC's taking certain actions to improve the performance of its operations, the efficiency of its generating plants, or cost-savings in its fuel procurement. That would offer CUC help with its short-range problem, while at the same time requiring it to respond to the more general criticisms and address longer-range problems as well.

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Short takes:

A yet broader lesson to be learned from the recent CUC hearing: someone needs to write a manual for government agencies on how to conduct public hearings. In contrast to CUC, which ran a very "loose" session, the Division of Environmental Quality has gone to the other extreme, and begun to hold very rigid, formal sessions, with lots of rules and prescribed procedures - due in part to contentious participants in the hearing process. But at least there, those who wish to speak get to do so within a reasonable amount of time, and the issues tend to be more directly addressed.

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The <i>Saipan Tribune</i> is to be commended for giving so much space on a regular basis to local environment issues. Also to be commended is Qamar Schuyler, Coral Outreach Specialist for DEQ, DFW, and CRM, whose excellent series of articles on issues related to the marine environment the <i>Trib</i> has been featuring in its Thursday issues. This last week's piece, on Marine Protected Areas, was, I thought, particularly helpful, informative, timely.

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I would also like to commend Pete J. Pangelinan Perez for his continuing efforts on behalf of the Pagan island community, and in particular for his comprehensive and all-encompassing statement in this past Tuesday's <i>Saipan Tribune</i>. It reviews the issues, spells out what is known and what isn't, and makes clear what needs to be done, and why Pagan supporters are objecting so strenuously to Azmar's unseemly, over-zealous, efforts to push its proposal.

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An apology: I stated, in my column of October 15, that the Bishop never attends Tanapag fiestas, and complained in particular that he did not attend this year's, when the new church bell tower was dedicated. Obviously, I was not in attendance that day, or I would have known differently, and just as obviously, my source wasn't very reliable. The Bishop did indeed attend, and while I have already made my apologies to him privately, I hereby apologize publicly.

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Lastly, a correction: In last week's column, I stated that China will shortly produce fully 80% of all clothing world wide. What was said, at that Chamber of Commerce session was that China has 70-80% of the market in Australia and Japan. I must have been projecting.....