

On My Mind

2/04/05

Two readers have written (one, directly via e-mail, another through a letter to the editor) to express their disagreement with my comments regarding the bill being considered by our legislature that would award extra pay to reservists. Since I suspect that they represent a number of others who believe as they do, I feel I should respond. Let me start by emphasizing that by no means did I mean to imply that I do not appreciate the risks the military are taking on our behalf. Far from it! Both my father and my ex- were in the military, my father having landed in France a week after D-Day and traveling with the Army as a medic all the way to Berlin during World War II. I do appreciate the risks involved. War - even undeclared war - is a dirty, miserable, life-threatening condition to have to be in. There is also stress on the families left behind.

One could argue that there is no limit to what those directly involved in fighting a war should be paid - since they are offering their very lives. Obviously, however, it is not possible to do that. One has to draw the line somewhere within reason.

And even though it may sound callous, the fact remains that those in the reserves were not drafted. They have not been forced to serve against their will. They have all volunteered. They are there because they made that decision for themselves. I think one also has to take into consideration that the benefits are numerous, and pretty generous. They are benefits that civilians don't get - some that not even others in the military get - benefits that continue after military service ends.

It is simply irresponsible to put the government, and the economy, even further into debt - depriving school children of textbooks and learning materials, depriving the community of decent health care, depriving government employees of a reliable retirement system, depriving hundreds of local vendors of their legitimate pay, depriving the public of adequate police and fire protection.

I would even quarrel with the governor's plans to travel to Iraq. More benefit to the families left behind could be gained by spending that money here, rather than by giving it to the airlines.

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More thoughts on how to bring additional traffic to the now mostly deserted Paseo: how about holding nightly concerts, or amateur shows, performed by local aspiring artists - which would encourage and support the arts as well as serve as attraction to the local community? Or conducting square dances - a novelty that might be especially attractive to tourists? Or holding mini-stock car races for kids on week-ends? Or roller-skating derbies?

Unfortunately, the problem of where to park one's car if one would want to attend a Paseo event has still not been resolved - not even for the handicapped.

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While neither the newspapers nor the Attorney General's Office has yet seen fit to regularly publish the title page of the monthly Commonwealth Register so that the public has an opportunity to comment on proposed regulations, at least one member of the AG staff has taken

it upon himself to provide copies of selected items from the Register to the media.

Unfortunately, the media has decided to ignore such notice. Draft regulations covering the procedures for submitting petitions to the office of the AG for recall, referenda, popular initiatives, etc., were published in the January issue of the Register. Copies were sent to all media. To date, the newspapers, at least, have ignored the notice.

Yet these proposed regulations are in dire need of comment. They are the most user-unfriendly regulations I have seen in some time. Terminology is confusing, headings are inaccurate and fuzzily worded, the organization is muddled - yours truly sent in nearly four full pages of single-spaced comment.

Copies may be available via e-mail, and can be viewed at the AG's office. Further information may be obtained by contacting Assistant Attorney James Livingstone at 664-2341.

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News that two Chinese brought in as part of a Century Tours group have gone missing - the alleged tourists reportedly were not seen entering the CNMI, nor were they seen departing - is disconcerting to say the least. Of course, they may never have arrived at all - it's possible they were on the passenger list but for some reason or other never actually left China. Let us hope that is the case.

But either way, it is Century Tours that has assured Chinese and U.S. officials alike, under the Memorandum of Understanding drawn up in conjunction with the China's Approved Destination Status designation for the CNMI, that it is capable of controlling the entry and departure of Chinese tourists it brings here. Now two brought in by Century Tours - though not brought in under the ADS protocol - have been lost track of. The timing could not have been worse.

Though I have not seen - or heard - the concern expressed elsewhere, the idea of hordes of Chinese tourists coming to Saipan has always made me uncomfortable. There is strong evidence that some aspect of a Chinese mafia is already operating on island. With so many more Chinese expected to arrive, will that also enlarge their operation? I've been told that the tourists will be coming from areas other than where the current crop of loan sharks and other unsavory elements are said to come from, but I find that small comfort. Faking of documents doesn't seem to be all that complicated. Nor, it would seem, does disappearing.

To look on the bright side, at least it will give the CNMI - Century Tours as well as the Immigration Division - the opportunity to work out whatever wrinkle it was in the procedure that allowed this to happen, so that they will be better prepared when the ADS tours do go into effect.

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In a related vein, assuming the statements made by Senator Diego M. Sangao of Rota in Thursday's Variety are correct - that CNMI officials have no concerns regarding the entry of Chinese tourists into Rota - it would appear that both he and Rota Mayor Benjamin T. Manglona are absolutely right - Rota is being discriminated against. As the Mayor said in an interview last month, "We're one Commonwealth....this action is a gross discrimination and insensitive to Rota's tourism and economic development."

With the bonanza that the ADS is supposed to bring to the CNMI, it seems churlish not to include Rota. Isn't MVA's newest travel promotion supposed to be pushing the concept of one region, one destination for all the islands? Yes, Tinian has an infrastructure in place, with Chinese operating the Dynasty Hotel and casino. Yes, Saipan is Century Tours' home base, and also can be said to have an appropriate infrastructure in place. But that is not justification enough. Rota is part of the CNMI. Rota is a significant tourist attraction. Rota is as dependent on tourists as are the other two islands. To cut Rota out seems indefensible.

The inability on the part of Century Tours or the Transportation Security Agency or CNMI's Immigration Division - to staff the handling of tours of Chinese in Rota - if that is indeed the problem - is no excuse. The three senatorial districts are entitled to be treated equally, and if funding is needed to allow Rota to participate, steps should be taken on the part of all involved to provide it. One would, moreover, expect the Governor - who has been strangely silent on the issue - to take a leadership role in seeing that fairness prevailed. Unfortunately, he is not noted for either.

Inter-island relations among Rota, Tinian and Saipan are not always the best to begin with. To exacerbate them by ignoring Rota's interests in the Chinese travel market is bound to have unexpected consequences, to create tensions and conflicts elsewhere. How much more fruitful if the Marianas Visitor Authority, Century Tours, the legislature and the administration would work together to ensure Rota a fair share of the anticipated benefits of the ADS!

The Tribune's question of the week has been: should the local government consider privatizing water services as well as power? The problem with trying to answer that question is that there does not seem to be enough data available on which to base an answer. Is the water service now being subsidized by the power services? To what extent? And where does the sewer service fit in? If water service were privatized, what impact would it have on the consumer? How big an impact? Is it really wise to separate out the water service, given the work of the Water Task Force, given the push to get more federal money for the water system?

And speaking of the Tribune, has anyone noticed that the Pacific Daily News is now running stories by Trib reporters on an almost daily basis? Apparently the PDN, in reaction to the Variety's Guam edition, has felt compelled to add more CNMI coverage, and went to the Trib for help. Competition's strange consequences - in this case, helping out the competitor!

Wouldn't it be nice if Anatahan finally blew its top good and proper, and brought an end to the haze that is killing plants, ruining cars and rainwater tanks, and causing lungs to ache and eyes to tear? Would dropping some explosive down inside help out? Don't know about anyone else, but I've had about enough of this kind of pollution!