

On My Mind

6/24/05

I had planned to write about the litmus test I see the visit to Saipan of the Japanese Emperor and Empress as being. How the event will reveal whether the 200+ members of the media expected to cover the event have left any sense of dignity, of respect, of understanding of what will be occurring here, and if so, how much. How it will be an indicator of whether those members of the media are capable of showing any restraint, or will be so competitive that they turn the event into a "feeding frenzy," raking up and exploiting every available scrap of irrelevant dirt, gossip, hearsay, past history, in the style of today's paparazzi.</P>

Here is an older couple, revered, admired, owed deference as symbolic head of a major foreign country, visiting a small outpost of World War II with the intention of honoring those who died in battle there. A simple, focused, non-controversial and reverent event of great cultural significance. The question is - or was - whether it will be handled as such, as it surely would have a few decades ago.</P>

But already the vultures are circling. Bringing up issues totally unrelated to the event's purpose. Creating tension instead of fostering sympathy and understanding. Reflecting ignorance and egocentrism instead of peace and honor. The behavior of the Japanese prime minister, the content of Japanese text books, the conduct of prior Japanese governments have nothing to do with this visit by the Emperor and Empress, with their wish to pray in remembrance of those who lost their lives on Saipan during World War II.</P>

Those who would protest, who would raise such issues, are defiling the mission being undertaken by the Imperial Couple, showing disrespect for those the Emperor and Empress would honor. They seek attention to meet their own ends, taking advantage of world coverage to promote causes - however valid - that have nothing to do with the event at hand. Moreover, those who would claim that there is no deference due the Imperial Couple because they are "just like us" when they step on U.S. soil show an embarrassing disregard, lack of understanding, for foreign relations, protocol, common courtesy.</P>

It remains to be seen to what extent the media will pick up on the detractors and to what extent they will focus on the event itself - an interesting litmus test of their sensitivities.

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Yet given the performance of one of the local papers, and, even more telling, the explanation given for that performance, it seem foreordained that the media will fail the test. The <EM>Saipan Tribune</EM>, in which this column also appears, ran a front page story earlier this week on a protest to the Imperial visit mounted by the local Korean Association. I promptly wrote an impassioned letter to the editor, berating him for his insensitivity and tendency towards sensationalism. But rather than publishing my letter, the editor took the opportunity to educate not only me, but the entire readership, about how front-page stories get there - what the criteria are, how they are ranked, why the choices are made as they are - on today's "Op-Ed" page.</P>

It is an informative, eye-opening account. Jayvee Vallejera, the <EM>Trib</EM>'s editor, lists

the news values two authorities have identified that make information newsworthy. Among them: impact, timeliness, prominence, personality, conflict, proximity, and human interest - all perfectly legitimate characteristics. But one of Vallejera's sources also lists "negativity (bad news)," and Vallejera then notes in a parenthetical statement, that "Bad news is always rated above 'positive' stories."</P>

I've not done a survey of news values that experts consider important to determining newsworthiness of a story. But it surely does appear as though most media subscribe to the position that negative/bad news deserves more attention, more coverage than does positive/good news. And that is where I part company with what I suppose one would call mainstream journalism. I believe that journalists should be more than mere recorders of events, and that journalism should be more than a reflection of what occurs. I believe that journalism and journalists, rather than emphasizing the negative, should be pro-active, should help their readers become productive members of society, should promote and support positive social and human values.</P>

In recent history, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's exposure of Watergate, or Daniel Ellsberg's release of the Pentagon Papers, come to mind as outstanding examples of the promotion of positive social (or perhaps political?) values. The muckraking of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that exposed corrupt public figures and dishonest companies is another example of what I would call pro-active journalism. Of course there's also Enron, but today's emphasis does not seem to be on accomplishing something positive so much as it seems to be on revealing scandal - one has only to look at the amount of coverage given Michael Jackson's trial for proof.</P>

I commend and respect Vallejera for his tempered, reasoned, and informative response to my impassioned letter. (To be accurate, he was also responding to others who had made similar comments.) But I deplore the acceptance and implementation of the importance of negativity in determining newsworthiness. Vallejera as much as says it would be a dereliction of duty if the paper did not give prime exposure to events such as the Korean protest of the Emperor's visit, and that it would be succumbing to personal and emotional considerations not to have done so.</P>

On the other hand, I believe such forbearance would be showing respect for the Emperor and Empress; it would be showing respect for the mission that brings them here; it would be showing respect for those whom the Imperial Couple have come to honor by their presence - all positive values that I feel journalism should also support.</P>

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There is, of course, also the concern about what the media will report about Saipan itself. Will the Ogle incident on Guam - where an ESPN.com reporter cavalierly mischaracterized all he did and saw on a brief visit to Guam, to the extent that Guam's non-voting representative was asked to protest in Washington, resulting, eventually in a formal ESPN.com apology - be repeated here? Will our "ladies of the night" be mentioned? Our ubiquitous poker parlors?</P>

Are there enough police to keep pan-handlers, pamphleteers and prostitutes off the street during the time the media is here covering the visit of the Emperor and Empress? Probably not. And the sad fact is that that may well cost the CNMI just as much in tourist traffic as it is purported

the threatened pull-out by Japan Airlines will cost.</P>

It has been said many times that word-of-mouth - the recommendation of a friend or colleague - is far more effective than any formal advertisement. How often are we told to take into consideration in deciding on a doctor, or a lawyer, or a therapist, or a school for one's child, the experience of someone we know and trust? The same is no doubt true of vacation destinations.</P>

Maybe the Marianas Visitors Authority should consider taking the millions it spends on advertising, and, instead, offer it to the Department of Public Safety, so DPS can properly, consistently, and effectively, enforce the laws against soliciting and loitering, and remove this blight on our reputation once and for all. Then every tourist would go back and tell his or her friends how hassle-free it was to walk the streets of Garapan. Wouldn't that be a wonder?</P>

There is, though, a flaw in the present law against soliciting. It is forbidden on public land. But what about the sidewalk in front of a private commercial establishment - like JoeTen in Garapan? Ways must be found to curtail activity there as well.</P>

In the meantime, all we can do is cross our fingers, and hope that the press will not be too harsh, unfriendly, discourteous, insensitive or inaccurate in how they choose to portray our island.

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On the subject of inaccuracy, it seems that an item about a congressman's actions, which appeared in last week's column, included not one, but several inaccuracies. I mis-identified his middle initial: it is Congressman Norman S. Palacios, not I. Palacios, as I had copied it from a story in the <EM>Tribune</EM>. In dyslexic fashion, I transposed the number of the bill I wrote that he had introduced - it should have been House Bill 14-337, not 14-377. And most egregious of all, I stated that he had introduced that bill, again copied from the same story in the <EM>Trib</EM>, when in fact he told me that he had not. I herewith offer my most sincere and abject apologies to Congressman Norman S. Palacios.</P>

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On another subject entirely, I think the legislature and the governor have put the accent on the wrong syllable, so to speak, in enacting Public Law 14-73, which punishes illegal taxi drivers - those who provide taxi service without a license. The reason we have illegal taxi drivers, and the reason that people are willing to drive illegal taxis, is because there is a demand for, and they provide, a service - cheap (public) transportation - that is not otherwise available. If licensed taxi-drivers charged more reasonable fees, there would be no business for the illegal drivers. But so long as licensed drivers charge such high fees, and no other options are available, illegal drivers will remain in demand.</P>

How about trying solving the problem, rather than just addressing the symptoms thereof?</P>

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If the CNMI had had a perceptive governor, and if that governor had made a strong, well-reasoned and coherent appeal to the members of the island community, requesting that they respect and honor the mission of the Imperial Couple during their 24-hour visit next week, and not defile the occasion with protests, would the Korean and Chinese communities have listened?

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Again, on another subject entirely: Not that I wish to sound elitist, but the killing off, one by one, of the leading political figures in Iraq by insurgents does more than just take another life. It drains the gene pool. Eventually, it will leave the Iraqi all the poorer in that their best and brightest will have been lost, and what remains will be second best. Nor is this a situation that exists only in Iraq. It occurs wherever targeted killings, leader assassinations take place. A thought worth thinking about.</P>