

On My Mind

8/5/05

It's too bad the Attorney General has taken such an adversarial stance against erstwhile CUC consultant Ramon S. Guerrero. In fact, it's more than merely too bad - in all probability it has only worsened the whole power situation, and prolonged even further the need for rolling power outages. As those who may recall Guerrero's style of operation as Special Assistant for Administration, as Executive Director of the Commonwealth Utilities Commission know, Guerrero has no patience with bureaucracy and red tape. His strength was his willingness to cut through all the procedural delays, to push ahead with what was needed, and with what needed to be done.</P>

No doubt this is what he intended when he submitted his sole-source procurement contract for \$509,000 that the Attorney General has allegedly refused to approve, and then allegedly used as justification for calling him a liar when he claimed it was her fault that repair parts for CUC's generators had not yet even been ordered.</P>

One would have thought that under the declaration of emergency, the governor could have found a way to approve and process Guerrero's submittal, that the governor would have helped his consultant find a way to do what the consultant - whom the governor hired because he thought Guerrero had some good ideas, according to the governor's PIO - recommended be done. Instead, the Attorney General, ever mindful of the governor, has attacked Guerrero and accused him of lying while defending the governor for "taking a great deal of political heat," according to a story in the Marianas Variety earlier this week.</P>

Yes there are rules and regulations one must follow. But isn't the whole point of the governor's declaring an "emergency" that rules can be waived?</P>

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On the other hand, the absence of hard and fast rules does not excuse flagrant violation thereof. The huge red, white, yellow, green and blue sign sitting directly across from the Okinawan memorial site in Marpi breaks every rule in the book - written and unwritten. The sign is an abomination, pure and simple. It's bigger than any other free-standing sign on island, to begin with. It is posted on a prime tourism site - selling a commercial message. The particular tourism site directly across from which it sits commemorates those who lost their lives during World War II - a site that deserves respect and homage, not blatant advertising.</P>

Ironically, the telephone number given on the sign is no longer in service.</P>

The Marianas Public Land Authority which leased the site to the vendor for, some say, a mere pittance, has shown a callous disregard for all that the Okinawan site - as well as the surrounding ones - represents; has shown disgraceful greed in allowing the vendor to sully the site by putting his billboard there; has shown contempt for tourists and islanders alike who come to pay their respect and to enjoy the undeveloped greenness of the area; and has set a fearful precedent for equally ungainly billboards in other sites considered sacrosanct - up until now.</P>

Does no one have authority enough to force MPLC to have the thing removed?</P>

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It is indicative of the extent to which local politics still are centered on family connections rather than on any particular political stance or issue, that so many political billboards contain just the name of the candidate - including the spelled-out middle initial - which usually refers to the mother's family name.</P>

Nowhere on the entire island are there signs that state a position, that offer voters a clue as to where a candidate stands, or how he or she might vote, on any issue - however small.</P>

Which is all the more reason why someone - anyone! - should get a list of past votes cast by incumbents running for re-election, and make that information available to the voting public. But unfortunately, the CNMI does not yet have a League of Women Voters, who traditionally serve this function, among others, in the states. Even if such information were available, it would not be available for those candidates who've not held office before - leaving those who do not know those candidate personally to take a gamble. As it is, without that information, many more voters will also be taking a gamble - not a good omen for accountable, responsible, government.</P>

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The new issue of Micronesian Counselor is out and once again Father Hezel, who authors many of the issues, has come up with a timely and important topic. This month it is "Loss of Culture: How Real is the Threat?" Hezel reviews the many expressions of concern that have been raised in the islands over the years - that development, that the introduction of television, and now the internet, that the shrinking globe and the arrival of more and more non-indigenous people - have all served to erode island culture.</P>

Hezel suggests, however, that outside, or modern, developments do not erode culture....In America, for example, "We have not used horses as our means of transportation for about a hundred years...Horse-driven buggies have yielded to trains and automobiles and buses and planes....The tools of our trades now are more more often computers than plows. Many of what we today consider the staples of American society are post-World War II innovations: motels, fast food, television and shopping malls, as well as computers, stereo sets, Nintendo games, VCRs and DVDs....Social norms have changed to the degree that not only is divorce accepted, but so are open same-sex relationships" - yet an American culture still exists, he points out.</P>

Another example he cites is the Japanese culture. Though life today bears little relationship to the days of sworded samurai and the daimyos they served, what he calls the spirit of that culture still persists - the formal courtesy that the Japanese display to others, the sparseness of their decor, their artists' somehow finding all of life embodied in a leaf or a blossom. "Not all these features can be articulated, not all of them are even discernible, and certainly not all of them are to be found in each individual from that culture. But there is an imprint of how life is meant to be lived...how people ought to conduct themselves," Hezel writes.</P>

Under the old definition of culture, culture was the sum total of the behavior of people, and of everything they produced - from food to shrines and burial rituals - along with the intricate

network of relationships between cultural products, he explains. But the persistence of a sense of culture despite the vast changes in both behavioral norms and products that have occurred over time suggests that that model does not fit facts. In the newer definition "culture is understood to mean not the observable cultural phenomena themselves, but the design for living that is passed from one generation to another."

Hezel states that "culture is not a display of exotic artifacts - feathered headdresses, shell belts, and stone pounders - to be displayed in the showcase of a museum. It is the pattern of life, the design for community living, that is found in real people as they exist today....We should be encouraging adaptation....Life forms, including humans, will survive only to the extent that they are prepared to accommodate to changes in environment...."

Thinking in terms of either economic development or the retention of culture, of education for life in a global village or life in the island village are false dichotomies, according to Hezel. After all, he concludes, "Americans or Europeans are not tormented by the fear that they will be making such colossal choices every time they decide whether a waterline or power line should be extended. Why should the Micronesians?"

What Hezel fails to take note of is the speed with which those changes are now assaulting island communities and similarly distinct cultural entities elsewhere. Change spread slowly in older times when communication was still confined to physical channels. Now, when the airwaves themselves carry communications bounced back from satellites the world over, there is no longer the ability to let time take its course, to taste and sample change, to reject that which is deemed not to fit, unacceptable, and to adopt and adapt that which is deemed to fit, to be acceptable, over a couple of generations. Massive change occurs within a single generation. Everyone is exposed to disruption, everything is known instantly.

Culture may not be bound by retention of the same artifacts over time, but certainly, the process of acculturation should not be rushed, but should only be undertaken with due deliberation, if the more lasting values of the culture in question are to survive.

The topic on this past week's KRNM/NPR's "Justice Talking" program, which airs on Thursdays from 3:00 to 4:00 p.m., on Sunday from 10:00 to 11:00 a.m., was journalists' treatment of confidential sources. The program, originally aired this past April, was still timely, as it dealt with the two reporters who were brought before a grand jury to reveal their sources regarding the "outing" of CIA agent Valerie Plame.

The point I found most telling during that hour was the statement by the professor (from NYU? I failed to take notes at the time) who, citing the Pentagon papers, Watergate, etc., observed that the issue would not exist if government were not so secretive. Also noted, however, was the oppressiveness of today's climate in that regard.

I, on the other hand, have felt oppressed by the unending flow of catalogs that clogs my mail box and then clutters my house from stores that I haven't even bought anything from in years, not to mention the irrelevant winter catalogs, the Christmas catalogs that arrive at Easter, the duplicate

catalogs....So I finally decided, once again, to try staunch the flow. I've called customer service at six companies so far, and each person that I talked to was, to my relief, pleasant and obliging. All promised my catalogs would cease within a month or two. Actually, it may well be three to five months, given that months' worth are already in that long pipe-line from there to here, but I feel lighter already!</P>