

On My Mind

9/09/05

The reports about the Hurricane Katrina disaster have been mesmerizing - and deeply disturbing.

To think that the U.S. could be so ineffective! Explanation has finally surfaced - at least in part. Apparently the head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency had no experience in dealing with hurricanes. Says Paul Krugman in an op-ed piece for the 9/5 issue of the <EM>New York Times</EM>, "For one thing, the undermining of FEMA began as soon as President Bush took office. Instead of choosing a professional with expertise in responses to disaster to head the agency, Mr. Bush appointed Joseph Allbaugh, a close political confidant. Mr. Allbaugh quickly began trying to scale back some of FEMA's preparedness programs."</P>

Continues Krugman, "The downgrading of FEMA continued [after 9/11], with the appointment of Michael Brown [FEMA deputy director] as Mr. Allbaugh's successor.</P>

"Mr. Brown [whom Maureen Dowd, another <EM>NYTimes</EM> writer, refers to as "a blithering idiot"] had no obvious qualifications, other than having been Mr. Allbaugh's college roommate. But Mr. Brown was made deputy director of FEMA; <EM>The Boston Herald</EM> reports that he was forced out of his previous job, overseeing horse shows. And when Mr. Allbaugh left, Mr. Brown became the agency's director. The raw cronyism of that appointment showed the contempt the administration felt for the agency; one can only imagine the effects on staff morale."</P>

It shows not only the administration's contempt for FEMA; such cronyism also proves how risky it is to appoint people to high-ranking positions according to the criteria of political patronage, rather than according to their professional job skills.</P>

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I was informed this past Wednesday that now that the CNMI chapter of the American Red Cross has closed out its Typhoon Nabi operation, it will begin raising funds for Hurricane Katrina victims. It couldn't do both at the same time?</P>

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An excellent site for on-the-scene reporting of events in the New Orleans area is the web page for the <EM>New Orleans Times Picayune</EM>, [www.nola.com](http://www.nola.com). It is hosting numerous forums, including ones for transportation and jobs; it is offering a location data bank; mid-week, it was still running pleas for rescue.</P>

The <EM>Times Picayune</EM>'s operation, heroic, resourceful, helpful as it is, makes one thing painfully clear. Those without access to or knowledge of computers have been and will continue to be doubly punished by Katrina and its aftermath; they have suffered and will continue to suffer far more than those with access to computers. Which is yet another aspect of planning for disasters that does not seem to have been taken into account by FEMA, or anyone else.</P>

Nor should other victims of Katrina - in Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, in the rest of southern Louisiana - be overlooked, forgotten.</P>

The <EM>Pacific Daily News</EM> in an editorial in this past Tuesday's issue urges the people

of Guam to donate to those organizations on Guam that always help Guam under similar circumstances: the American Red Cross, the Salvation Army and "Network for Good." Notes the editorial, "They're here for us; it's time we were there for them. Call it chen'chule. Call it giving back or paying it forward. No matter what you call it, just do it - give."

It's an idea that makes sense for the CNMI as well.

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It would also make sense, it seems to me, if the PDN and the local papers would do whatever it takes to make clearly visible at least Guam and Saipan on their weather maps, or clearly label the coordinates. When storms or even troughs of one sort or another are in the area, the islands get lost in the clouds, so to speak. And since the maps do not use the same coordinates from one day to the next, it is not possible to tell exactly where a storm or the troughs are in relation to where we are. Even if the maps come from some national feed, technology should be able to allow the papers to add clarifying indicators.

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What doesn't make sense, on the other hand, is the Saipan Chamber of Commerce's decision to combine apples and oranges, or more accurately, to combine the service of providing access to information with fund-raising - for its Armed Forces Committee and its scholarship fund - and charging attendees as much as \$20 per debate for each of the three political debates it plans to sponsor next month.

Perhaps everyone who is willing to support the Chamber's fund-raising efforts in those two areas will also be interested in listening to the debates - one between gubernatorial candidates, another between senatorial candidates, and the third between candidates for Washington rep. But not everyone who is interested in listening to the debates will be willing, or can afford, to support the Chamber's fund raising-efforts. Entrance fees for the debates have been set as follows: \$7 in advance for students, \$15 in advance for all others, and \$20 at the door for everyone.

Saipan Chamber president Alex Sablan said the debates would be re-broadcast over cable tv; but whether schedules will be available as to exactly when that will happen is not clear. Moreover, he said that the Chamber had done the same thing for years, which I, at least, do not remember being so. In any case, it's too bad that what could be valuable information that would help guide voters to make intelligent decisions at the polls in November will come at such a high price - a total of between \$45 and \$60, depending on whether tickets are purchased ahead of time or at the door. That is not, in my book, a public service!

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Nor does it make a lot of sense to me that the solution proposed by government to the illegal taxi operations is to ask people to file complaints so the taxi drivers can be taken to court. The existence - and success - of the "gypsy" cabs is proof that they fill a need, that there is no lack of customers if the service is reasonably priced.

It would make a lot more sense to re-evaluate the current rate-setting process, and urge the legitimate taxi drivers to set their rates at a more reasonable level. They'd get more customers since more people would be more willing to use them, and the customer base for the illegal cabs would shrink, if not disappear, thus eliminating the need to go through expensive court procedures.

But that would require lawmakers and policy makers to progress beyond knee-jerk reactions and to examine issues in a broader context - something that most of them seem to have great difficulty doing.</P>

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They're not quite knee-jerk reactions, but neither do two of the three bills passed by the House in support of the Public School System take into consideration the broader issues involved. House Bill 14-369, which has also passed the Senate according to a story in this past Thursday's <EM>Tribune</EM>, would exempt PSS from paying the recent increase in contributions to the Retirement Fund. H.B. 14-370, still before the Senate according to a story in Wednesday's <EM>Variety</EM>, would exempt PSS from paying the 1% deduction destined for the Public Auditor's Office as well as the 2% deduction assigned to reduce the deficit.</P>

Not that the PSS may need supplemental financial resources, but this solution sets a dangerous precedent. If PSS is given such exemptions, other government agencies will be quick to demand that they, too, be allowed an exemption to those deductions. And, if the comparison may be drawn, the cumulative effect of such deductions will only lower the government's over-all revenue, much as does the Commonwealth Development Agency's waiver of taxes under its "qualifying certificate" program.</P>

A broader perspective is necessary. Surely reducing government revenue is not the only means available for assisting needy government agencies (or new developments). Government agencies, at least, could be encouraged to cut costs and operate more efficiently, and/or laws could be changed to make procurement of goods and services less costly and cumbersome.</P>

Which leaves the governor in quite a dilemma. Will he, as pro-education, sign H.B.14-369 into law, because it will help PSS? Or will he, despite being pro-education, veto it, because it hurts the NMI Retirement Fund, which is already suffering from the lack of contributions from government?</P>

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The new movie listings for the week are out. We're making progress. There are only two films rated "R." The remaining five are rated "PG-13." The previous two weeks, there were four films rated "R," and only three rated "PG-13."</P>

But what about people who don't like violence and crass language and raunchy behavior, exploitive sex? What about families with children? Why is Hollywood Theater so consistently ignoring significant components of its potential customer base?</P>

Would competition help? Should the powers that be be out there soliciting an independent theater operator to set up business here? Maybe then even "March of the Penguins" would come to Saipan.</P>

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A new show opens at the Commonwealth Council for Arts and Culture on Monday, September 12, at 10:00 a.m. It will run through October 28, and will feature arts and crafts - beads, wood carving, painting, weaving - from around the Pacific - some for sale, some for display. The public is invited. Hours are from 8:00 a.m. til 4:00 p.m. Monday through Friday, and 9:00 a.m. til 1:00 p.m. on Saturdays.</P>

