

On My Mind
10/21/05

First, a correction. In last week's column I criticized the appointment of Harriet Meirs to the Supreme Court on the grounds that she'd never had any experience as a judge. But after a reader took issue, I discovered that the criticism was misguided - any number of Supreme Court justices had no previous judicial experience when they were appointed. As another reader noted, the original intent was only that they be wise. I stand corrected, as my father used to say.</P>

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As promised, what follows are random comments - and in no particular order - on the ever more heated political campaigning that is dominating the local scene at the moment - the roads just about saturated with signs, the newspaper ads getting bigger and blunter, partisan accusations more and more frequent. Won't we all be glad when it's finally over!</P>

To begin with, it sure would be nice if the campaigners improved their portable sound systems. I'm tempted to say that I'd vote for the candidate with the least scratchy music - the volume is more than ample, but the tone leaves something to be desired.</P>

I've come across two more platforms: the one issued by the Hofschneider-Apatang ticket and the Tenorio-Santos one, which finally made an appearance in today's Variety. The first, in typical Hofschneider fashion, is long on words. And much of what Hofschneider and Apatatang stand for, what they pledge to do, is couched in impersonal, third party form: "Power outages will no longer be tolerated." "Road safety must be improved." "Private sector health care services...should be encouraged."</P>

But in other sections, they are more assertive: "We will re-instate the planning office..." "We pledge to restore confidence in the procurement practices of all government agencies." "We will work with the business community..."</P>

The most significant difference from other platforms: their pledge to keep in office qualified officials, regardless of party. Their platform says, "There will be a place for good ideas and policies in our administration, regardless of party affiliation." "We promise to do our absolute best to make appointments to key positions on the basis of experience and qualifications." "Officials who have performed well in their current positions need not fear removal from office if we are elected." Wouldn't that be a remarkable, invigorating and welcome change!</P>

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The Tenorio-Santos Democratic platform is equally typical of its candidate - in the first line of the first paragraph of the platform as published, the word "I" appears not once, but twice. For potential voters who were not here in those tumultuous times when Froilan Tenorio first served as governor, a few tidbits: this column gave him the nickname "Roilin Froilan" because he was constantly roiling up the waters. I don't know what he said in the pocket meetings and campaign rallies prior to that election, but the foreboding became clear in his inauguration speech, which was full of what "I" will, and plan, and intend, to do. There was little, if any, acknowledgment of a role for the legislature, or department heads, or anybody else. He seems to be following the

same pattern this time.</P>

My memory is that he issued more executive orders than any previous governor, though I am not sure but that the present governor may have surpassed that record. Tenorio tried valiantly to carry out a major re-organization of the executive branch which kept going through one revision after another, and it was Tenorio who instituted titling department heads "Secretary" when they had previously been called "Director." I don't have as keen a memory as others; it would behoove voters to learn more about his previous administration.</P>

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I have not seen the platforms of the Republican party. That duo seems to be campaigning on its past performance, rather than on what, if re-elected, it would do over the next four years.</P>

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On the other hand, I found the full-page ad paid for by the Hofschneider/Apatang ticket that features a 21-year old who is unhappy that he has not been able to find a job 'off the mark,' so to speak. Meaning no disrespect for the young man depicted in the ad, the ad implies that everyone is entitled to a job, regardless of whether or not he or she has any skill, talent or ability whatsoever.</P>

There is a huge need for skills training in the CNMI, not only for graduating high schoolers, but also for adults. Even so, the reality is that there will never be enough resident warm bodies in the CNMI to fill all the jobs available, and the sooner that is publicly acknowledged, the better. As noted in a recent International Herald Tribune excerpt taken from the London Daily Telegraph, " The problem is that what the economy requires [that is, more foreign workers] is often difficult to digest culturally."</P>

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Those who don't yet have a clear idea of who is running for what office may want to go to the Election Commission website, "votecnmi.gov.mp" and click on "results 2005." The form has already been set up for tallying votes by district for every elected office, and every question on the ballot, so one can see the whole array.</P>

A sample ballot has not been printed because the Election Commission did not have enough funds to do so, given the education campaign that was necessary this year because of the concon and judicial retention questions on the ballot.</P>

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Many of the political campaigns promise that more will be done for the people, on some level or other. Chief among the needy seems to be the Public School System, with its maintenance problems in the schools. While it may not be a popular approach, it seems to me that the solution lies in promoting a greater degree of self-reliance in those who are doing all the complaining. It is a strategy that the private schools have adopted long since, and it's about time the public schools did too.</P>

The irony is that most of the parents who know anything about repairing plumbing, or aircons, or replacing windows or building shelves are probably foreign workers, and if the schools were to enlist the help of parents to fix the problems, the burden would fall on them, not on the indigenous population. The amount that could be done, and the money that could be saved are substantial. The challenge is how to divide the labor equitably.</P>

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Another encouraging and re-assuring change is that this time some leaders are actually speaking out against the holding of another concon. Two points to bear in mind: the U.S. Constitution, now in existence for some 203 years, has been amended only 27 times. On the other hand, a mere ten years after the CNMI Constitution was approved, the 2nd Concon came up with 44 amendments - of which all but one are still in effect. The second, perhaps even more noteworthy point: nine more amendments have been made to the CNMI Constitution since the 2nd Concon, and all were made through legislative initiatives, without the holding of a costly concon.</P>

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Short Takes:

- Here's one for the books: both local newspapers have been running nearly full-page ads for more than a week noting that Bank of Hawaii is a member of FDIC, and asking whether "your" bank is also a member. I thought that rather interesting, and tried to call the bank to see if someone would tell me why the bank, presumably, is running the ad. My call was answered in Hawaii, no one there had an answer, and when attempts were made to transfer my call to Saipan, I was told that only a voice-mail box was responding. I asked for a local phone number so I could dial directly, and was told that Hawaii could not give it to me. Talk about accessibility!</P>

In an on-going court case the Bank of Saipan, NOT a member of FDIC, is asking for an end to its receivership status. It seemed obvious to me that the Bank of Hawaii ad was prompted by that case. But I guess I'll have to wait til I can go there in person to make sure.</P>

- Those who don't see the Pacific Daily News are missing an interesting series of ads. Two organizations, Victim Advocates for Reaching Out and Project SAFE Neighborhoods, are co-sponsoring a series of eye-catching ads about the consequences of gun crimes - featuring pictures of hand-cuffs, paper cut-outs of guns, and rifle return policies. In each case, the ad notes that if people have been convicted of domestic violence, or are a convicted felon, carrying a gun can land them in federal prison. Very effective.</P>

- A funny piece of history can be found in the September issue of Micronesian Counselor, found on-line at "micsem.org". The issue reprints an account, "A caricature of infinity: journal of a field trip," by Jesuit Father Neil Poulin, who died two years ago after serving 35 years on Yap, about a visit to the outer islands of Yap in 1988. Those were the days.....</P>

- This week's film tally: two "R," four "PG-13," and only one "G" film safe to take the kiddies to.</P>

- KRNM is having rather severe problems with its translator on Mt. Tapachau. The timing couldn't be worse - right in the middle of a semi-annual fund drive. Station Manager Carl Pogue has said he may have to drop U.S. programs and use Australian or British ones (they are cheaper) if sufficient funding to repair the translator is not forthcoming. Send your contributions to KRNM at NMC, P.O. Box 501250, Saipan, MP 96950. Do it now!</P>

- And lastly, here's a radical idea to ponder on: there are 14,948 registered voters in the CNMI. The population of the CNMI is in the 60,000 to 70,000 range. That amounts to nearly 75% of the population that does not vote, and whose interests are not represented in the legislature. Granted most of that 75% is made up of foreign workers, but a fair number of them have worked in the CNMI for 10 years or more, and in any case, all of them are as affected by the decisions made by the other 25% as are the voting residents. Doesn't seem balanced, somehow.

To address the problem of total disregard of such a large part of the population, at least three alternatives come to mind: the governor could establish a task force to discuss ways of improving the situation, another "special assistant" position in the administration could be established to monitor and support their interests, or - and here's the really radical idea - thought might be given to awarding the non-represented a non-voting seat in the House of Representatives.</P>