

On My Mind
6/09/06

The abrupt termination of government employees says a lot about how this administration functions: arbitrarily, arrogantly, autocratically, disrespectfully, secretly.... 24-hour notice that termination letters will be issued? No advance notice, no meaningful offer of compromise or alternatives, no discussion of criteria for who gets notices? No information about how those decisions were made, and by whom?

A mention in a press conference that "drastic actions may have to be taken by August 1" - an explanation provided me when I asked when a specific target date had been mentioned at all, in regard to a June 6 announcement about "moving the target date to July 1" - does not, in my opinion, constitute fair warning. To be open, fair, and reasonable, the possibility of termination should have been accompanied by details on who would be subject to termination and why, a fixed deadline with room to negotiate, and a set of rational, relevant alternatives - none of which, obviously, happened. (The only "alternative" being offered - to pass the Senate bill that would emasculate the Retirement Fund - makes no sense. Just why, or how, would forgiving the administration's debt to the RF save so much money that terminations would not be necessary?)

Is this any way to run a government?

Among other things, requiring the Retirement Fund to sell its assets in order to pay retirees - which passage of this bill would necessitate - violates well-established financial principles. According to Governor Mitch Daniels of Indiana, "it is a mistake - a misdeed, even - to take value from a capital asset and use it for short term operating purposes." Could anything be more clear?

The quote comes from a story in the on-line [New York Times](#) 5/27/06 issue about the Indiana governor's justification for privatizing one of the state's toll highways.

Other issues raised by the bill, and the flood of comments the debate has generated, call for more time and effort than available at the moment, but shall be forthcoming!

In the meantime, some short takes:

It is ironic, to say the least, that 130 miles to the south, there is much optimism about the upcoming transfer of 8,000 Marines - not to mention families, support personnel and other military - to Guam, and its promise for an expanding economy. In the CNMI, which is bound to benefit from the influx, regardless of whether formal commitments for training or other uses of CNMI land are signed, there is only pessimism and uncertainty.

For example, legislators were told, according to an article in yesterday's [Tribune](#) , that available CIP funds should not be used to improve and upgrade CUC because the CIP funds should be reserved for such things as "destination Enhancement," part of the governor's five-year plan for bringing more tourists to the CNMI.

However, rather than delaying commitment of CIP funds for eventual use on a proposed but not-yet-implemented "strategic initiative," wouldn't it be more immediately profitable, and logical, to spend those CIP funds on CUC? Then the CNMI could point to its reliable power system, and encourage the military to use the CNMI for recreation, training - without apology, without spending any advertising dollars. After all, it is a given that the military will come, and in great numbers. It is a gamble whether the tourists will come - with no certainty as to number. Wouldn't the CNMI be better off if it focused more on such positive certainties???

One group focusing on positive certainties is the newly-formed Beautification Task Force, brought together by Congresswoman Cinta Kaipat. Yesterday it had its second monthly meeting, and the accomplishments achieved over such a short period of time were impressive indeed. The re-cycling sub-committee reported that a re-cycling station has been set up at the Liberation Day fair grounds as well as re-cycling bins, and that efforts are under way to do the same on Managaha, as well as in all schools. The restoration subcommittee announced that two tree-plantings have been scheduled, one from 6/19-22 to replace flame trees on Beach Road and another on 8/12 and 8/26 to plant trees along Middle Road. The litter subcommittee is focusing on enforcement of litter laws, and promoting communication among enforcement officers in the various agencies; declaration of a "zero-tolerance" week is upcoming.

At last count, ten garment factories had closed. What is happening to the space they occupied? To the barracks their workers lived in? Much of the land, apparently, is in private hands, which means that those land-owners are now left with big white elephants to deal with. Has anyone looked at those empty buildings to see how else they might be used? whether there is some way to profit from them, and help the economy at the same time?

Maybe whoever is in charge of trying to find new sources of government revenue could offer to help landowners find new tenants? What if there were a listing of all the now-empty buildings and it was advertised, distributed to, shared with, potential investors here and abroad? Seems that here is a readily accessible asset - even though in private hands - that could benefit both private sector and government if it were properly marketed.

On the subject of counting, the Pacific Daily News has carried a couple of stories on the upcoming 2010 nation-wide census, and Guam's preparation for the event. According to the story, Guam is putting together a list of subjects specific to the island that it wants included, and must, by September 2008, prepare and submit wording for the specific questions to be asked.

Questions on the 2000 census specific to Guam included "parental birthplace; fertility; vocational training; English usage; source of water; type of sewage disposal; the type of materials homes are built of; and whether residents have air conditioning and battery-powered radios."

Does the CNMI get the same right to submit questions of its own choosing? If so, who will draw them up? And what would they be? According to the article, "the questions should demonstrate a broad need." Is anyone working on this in the CNMI? Anyone have any

suggestions?

The CNMI is not the only entity that thinks more casinos will attract more tourists. Apparently, even Japan is toying with the idea. An Associated Press item in the PDN a couple of months ago noted that the Japan's Liberal Democratic Party "would encourage lifting Japan's ban on gambling parlors, following in the steps of Singapore, which last year reversed its decades-old ban on casinos."

If Japan does permit gambling parlors, how badly would that affect tourism traffic to Tinian? or would it - given the emphasis on Chinese tourists on Tinian? On the other hand, is there any sense of whether Singapore's change of heart has, or will, affect Tinian? After all, there probably are a lot fewer travel restrictions for Chinese traveling to Singapore (a Chinese entity) than to the CNMI (a U.S. entity).

Another timely issue of Micronesian Counselor has appeared, this one on the subject: "Who will own Business in Majuro?" written by Father Fran Hezel. Hezel reviews the factors that have led to a considerable Taiwanese Chinese presence in the Marshalls, noting in particular the buying out of long time business tycoon Robert Reimers' landmark supermarket by a Taiwanese, and its reopening under the name Formosa Store.

Chinese gained a foothold in the Marshalls when the Republic of the Marshall Islands sold passports in the late 80's into the mid '90's, some of which were marketed specifically to the Taiwanese. Estimates are that there are now over 300 mainland Chinese and 150 Taiwanese on Majuro.

The sale of passports was eventually stopped, but in the meantime, "the inflow of an ethnic Chinese population [that] has claimed a major share of business in Majuro today," Hezel writes. He discusses some of the repercussions of that presence, from lower prices in the stores due to competition and the possible impact on the educational standards, to accusations of unfair business practices and land displacement.

The dilemma facing the RMI, as well as other Pacific entities, is whether the advantages of foreign investment sufficiently outweigh the disadvantages, and whether it should follow Asian Development Bank-sponsored reforms and liberalize its foreign investment policies, or whether it should "retain its restrictions to ensure control of its own business." A timely topic indeed!

The decision by the Pacific Games Council to allow only citizens of participating island nations to compete, and the possibility that the Micronesian Games may have to follow suit is troublesome. No doubt there could be problems if athletes were free to seek out countries with little competition to better their own chances of being selected for such competitions, but surely other solutions than such absolute prohibition could have been found?

Why not, for example, a requirement that athletes have resided in the country they were representing for a minimum of five years? In today's climate of more open borders, such a

prohibition seems punitive, rather than supportive.</P>

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I have no answer to the oft-asked question of why the Tribune decided to no longer print my column. I can make the assumption that interests at the paper did not like what, or how, I was writing....but as for the real answer, only those who made the decision can provide it.</P>

As for putting it in the Variety, its publisher had earlier rejected the column. Hence the distribution via e-mail. Recipients are encouraged to forward the column to others, and to suggest additional recipients (together with their e-mail addresses, please :-). </P>

This week's movies: 1 R, 5 PG-13's, 1 PG. Is it really true that they purposely "spice up" movies to attract more customers? Ugh!</P>