

On My Mind  
10/27/06

Next week, the CNMI will observe Citizenship Day - the day former President Ronald Reagan declared U.N. trusteeship of the CNMI at an end, and the day the last of the provisions of the Covenant finally went into effect. As one outcome of Reagan's declaration, most of the people of the CNMI became U.S. citizens.

A high value status that others not born in the U.S. have achieved only with great difficulty through a drawn-out process that ordinarily involves lengthy delays, bureaucratic paperwork, and a knowledge of U.S. history, was bestowed upon the people of the Northern Marianas in an instant - without fanfare, without notice, without any kind of ceremony. Once again, the U.S. missed an opportunity to provide a model - this time of observance and celebration - that would have heightened appreciation of the significance of the occasion and of the unique distinction now held by the people of the CNMI.

Thus it is, perhaps, that while eagerly taken as yet another paid holiday, ceremony and celebration of Citizenship Day in the CNMI is sorely lacking.

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More signs of "penny-wise and pound-foolish" - of incurring greater future costs by refusing to spend modestly now - keep appearing as the administration pushes its "austerity drive" further and further. This has brought not only an exodus of local families seeking better pay elsewhere, but also an exodus of contract-hire professionals, such as teachers and librarians. Now the CNMI Senate has said it will refuse to give the Department of Public Works an extension on what was an unreasonable limit to begin with, forcing the DPW to let go an architect and four engineers, who happen to be foreign workers.

DPW had been under a deadline to terminate all professional foreign workers, in order to provide jobs to local residents. In place since 2002, the deadline has twice been extended, first to 2005, then to 2006. But Senate President Joseph M. Mendiola, according to a story in the *Saipan Tribune* earlier this week, has refused to grant another extension because the agency has "never compl[ied] with the law."

This will force the DPW either to go without the services of those professionals altogether - a dire thought indeed! - or to attempt to hire staff from the mainland - since the labor pool in the CNMI is not exactly overflowing with engineers and architects. And if it was, would those engineers and architects work for the salaries paid the foreign workers? Nor will professionals brought over from the mainland.

So either way, it is going to cost DPW, and therefore, the CNMI, much more to continue to perform its functions than it would have, had the Senate approved of another extension for the hiring of professionals who were foreign workers.

Until a larger number of local residents achieve professional degrees, the CNMI will continue to need off-island professionals - be they from the mainland, the Philippines or other Asian countries. Continuing to impose punitive employment conditions that drive professionals away may appear to help the economic picture in the short term, but will only impose greater costs in the long run.

The way out of the present economic dilemma, it is being said, is to borrow money to pay off some of the accumulated debts - primarily to vendors - the government has incurred. Mike Sablan, CNMI's Public Auditor, has suggested that the CNMI seek to amend its Constitution to allow it to borrow \$60 to \$70 million dollars to help offset a deficit of nearly \$180 million. "The vendors have provided goods and services in good faith - government has a financial obligation to pay them," he said.

At the same time, the CNMI is seeking another \$140 million to "stimulate the local economy," according to Finance Secretary Eloy Inos, as reported in the *Variety* this past Monday. Some of that, it is hoped, will come from more cover-over reimbursements from the U.S. Internal Revenue Service.

What worries me is that someone will take it into his or her head to combine the needs, and attempt to authorize a borrowing of the full \$320 million through a constitutional amendment. The only hope is that the structure of the proposal, the conditions of the loan, are sufficiently stringent to keep the whole process under control.

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On a broader scale, I also worry about the parochialism of some in the U.S. who have proclaimed that there is no need to be concerned about the U.S. reaching a population of 300 million, which it did this past week. In fact, in a story in last week's *Pacific Times* the Populations Research Institute is quoted as saying that the U.S. needs even more people to sustain the Social Security System and to support the retirement benefits of its workers.

Moreover, only 4.7% of American land is built up, according to the story.

The World Wildlife Fund, on the other hand, says we will need two planets' worth of natural resources every year by 2050 if current consumption and population growth tendencies continue. "2006 Living Planet," a report just published by WWF and Global Footprint Network, states that "For more than 20 years we have exceeded the Earth's ability to support a consumptive lifestyle that is unsustainable and we cannot afford to continue down this path."

An organization called "Redefining Progress" on the web at <[www.rprogress.org](http://www.rprogress.org)> explains that "Ecological Footprint is a measure of the amount of nature it takes to sustain a given population over the course of a year. According to the new "2005 Footprint of Nations" report, humanity's footprint is 57 acres per person while the Earth's biological capacity is just 41 acres per person."

As might be expected, the U.S. has the largest footprint - consuming more, per capita, than any other country. Thus while the claim that it needs even more people might appear to ease national retirement benefit concerns, it only heightens the world-wide concern about the earth's resources overall.

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Short takes:

Not, perhaps, so much penny wise and pound foolish as distinctly unfriendly to local business is the decision by the Commonwealth Health Center to renew the contract with PHI Pharmacy for only a few months rather than a full term. CHC had issued a request for proposal for pharmaceutical services. PHI was the only one to respond. But now CHC has decided it will recall its RFP, and issue a new one based on the move to its new wing. Excuse me? What difference does that make? PHI has served CHC well for the past ten years. It was the only

respondent to the original RFP. What is CHC waiting for, looking for? And why was PHI's bona fide response not honored?

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The story about Mel Pangelinan's entry into the taxi business (see last week's column) brought to mind another kind of taxi service that might also be useful and do-able here - a boat taxi to Tinian and back. What would it take to start up an on-demand service, similar to Pangelinan's, for transportation to and from Tinian via boat? I don't know whether the fuel costs would make the "taxi" fare prohibitive, but lots of people own small boats that could - and probably do - make the channel crossing. Particularly with the ferry down to such few crossings, would that be an idea worth pursuing?

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I was intrigued to read in Tuesday's *Trib* that the pseudonymous Holani Smith, of Tanapag, thinks praise is due to the Governor because of the crucial role the Governor played in bringing in the garment factories during his tenure as Speaker of the House. Is there really anyone who, thinking back and looking at the pollution that was caused, at the size of the Puerto Rico dump full of garment discards, at the hundreds of foreign workers brought in, at the destruction of village integrity, at the added demands on the police department, on health services, on the power supply, on the water and sewer systems, now believes the garment factories were good for the CNMI?

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On the other hand, I was appalled at the *Variety's* caption on the front-page picture of the new MidPac Micronesia auto parts store going up across from Dolphin Wholesale in San Jose. From the looks of it, it will be a huge eyesore on a major island thoroughfare - and that's what "we need more" of? I don't think so. More new construction, yes. But not big ugly buildings on main thoroughfares that constitute a blot on the landscape, rather than an improvement to the view. Oh, zoning, where are you?

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Two cases of passiveness continue to amaze me - one of individuals, one of organizations. No one has yet sued our lone cable company for what appears to be a major decline in services (I haven't subscribed in years, so know this only from many others' complaints). Nor has anyone attempted to organize a sit-in, a demonstration, a boycott of services. I would hope that at least its customers have stopped paying any fees for service! On the organizational front, there are the Marianas Visitors Authority and the Hotel Association of the NMI, neither of which appears to have let out a single squawk at either the stench or the health hazard caused by the drainage ditch next to the former Dai Ichi Hotel in Garapan that continues to contaminate the lagoon beachfront. Why is that? What are they waiting for? Why haven't they sued? Talk about tourist-unfriendly!

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A case of inflexibility also baffles me: the Saipan mayor's insistence on using \$30,000 to remove junk cars from Saipan - when an MoU with a Guam firm will remove them at no cost - because of the fear that the money will be lost if not spent as originally appropriated, and because there's no certainty as to when the MoU will go into effect. That's according to a staff member of the Mayor's office. Just think of the new equipment the mayor could have acquired with that \$30,000!

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Only one new movie this week: another R-rated horror crime. Others: 2 PG's, 2 PG-13's, 2 R's.

*"On My Mind" can also be found on the web at <[www.chamorro.com](http://www.chamorro.com)> or at <[www.cnmi.net](http://www.cnmi.net)> (just click on "News & Weather"). If you missed a column due to an overfull mailbox or whatever, you can find it in the "Archives" section.*