

On My Mind  
6/15/07

Well, well, well. Seems that what I'd labelled in last week's column as the "most outrageous story of the week" wasn't a mere coconut wireless rumor after all. According to Thursday's *Saipan Tribune*, there is indeed interest in decriminalizing marijuana in the CNMI. The CNMI Attorney General appears to be behind the move - allegedly as a means of raising revenue for the CNMI. So far, the governor - while not acknowledging that he supports that interest - has done nothing to discourage or stop the AG's efforts.

The rumor had it that the goal was to set aside part of Marpi as a "free" zone for users of marijuana. That "interest" has now taken the guise of offering the CNMI as a venue for holding a conference or a "meeting of experts" to discuss marijuana's "benefits and/or lack of harm." This the administration would welcome with open arms, according to Press Secretary Charles P. Reyes as quoted in today's *Marianas Variety*, "because conferences are good for tourism."

Reyes said that the administration cannot prevent groups from holding conferences on island, that the conference would generate publicity for the islands, and that the administration and the CNMI government are "open to outside people, from California or wherever if they want to hold a conference."

I'll admit at the outset that I am inclined to support the use of marijuana in cancer cases, where it is said to ease the pain for cancer victims. Though this use has not been approved by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, that doesn't necessarily mean the drug is ineffective, and I'm all in favor of whatever helps cancer victims cope. But that's as far as I go. I do not support general use of the stuff. Nor have I ever tried it.

However, the "conference" that is now being proposed does not purport to be about medicinal uses of marijuana. Its purpose, at least as stated so far, is to discuss its benefits, its lack of harm. That's very different. It is already biased. Moreover, how anyone in his/her right mind could think that such a conference could possibly benefit the CNMI is beyond comprehension. It would - no doubt about it - attract attention. But not the kind that would help the CNMI. The CNMI would be held up to scorn and ridicule all over the world. This tiny U.S. entity, with no background, no knowledge, no experience in the subject, holding a conference on the **benefits** of a hallucinogenic drug that the U.S. DEA does not even approve of?

Those who attend the conference can be expected to be marijuana users - people, described in my desk encyclopedia, as apt to be in a "dreamy euphoric state of altered consciousness, with feelings of detachment and gaiety." Maybe fun at a party, but not much use in the real world. Moreover, should the conference take place, the long-range effects could be pretty devastating. The many tourists who expect the CNMI to be a clean, safe place will decide to go elsewhere - a major economic loss - and those who do drugs - marijuana or whatever else - will come flooding in, hardly an appealing addition. What we have here is yet another example of failing to consider "unintended consequences."

The Secretary of the Department of Public Health has, according to the *Tribune*, already stated his opposition to the scheme. He was apparently asked by the AG to ask the Legislature to remove marijuana from the CNMI's list of controlled substances. In a letter to the AG, the Secretary said that he "could not ignore the physical and psychological damage that he had seen drugs, including marijuana, cause to people." He noted, in addition, that DPH would have to

deal with the likely consequences. "I cannot support a move that I know will cause more harm than good," he is quoted as saying.

In a setting where most people are devoutly religious, where hallucinogenic drugs are banned, where addiction to ice, tobacco, beer and poker parlors are already rampant, where efforts to teach kids to "say 'no' to drugs," to promote the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) program are on-going, the administration wants to introduce legalizing of marijuana?

This administration is already notorious for floating one crazy untenable scheme after another. Which isn't the way to plan, or to govern, or to accomplish anything, to begin with. It is indicative of its desperation that it would now go so far as to propose the legalization of marijuana in a place that still hold family values as central to their lives as do the people of the CNMI.

\*\*\*

It hardly seems to matter whom one talks to, where one goes - the signs and symptoms of a disintegration of government services are everywhere. Schools are out of books, out of supplies, out of staff; the hospital is out of blood for transfusions, short of medications, and there's only one surgeon; cases at the Public Auditor's Office are piling up due to a shortage of staff; the Retirement Fund keeps drawing down on its principal to pay retirees; medicaid applications are not being processed; CUC's rates are rising without off-setting improvements in services; the public library lacks a professional librarian; individuals are going deeper and deeper into debt - like the father who brought in his child so sick, because he hadn't been able to afford medication, that the child had to be hospitalized, thereby incurring hundreds of more dollars of debt - and there's no end in sight.

With the administration out of good ideas, with mismanagement and inefficiencies rampant throughout the various agencies of government, with services dangerously degrading as a consequence, where is the answer? what is the solution? The need for reform would seem to be everywhere - throughout almost the entire system. (Yes, there are a few exceptions. There are a few good agencies, and a few good administrators, battling a seemingly intractable system. But the poorly-run operations far outnumber those that are well-run, that do get their job done on time, don't acquire back logs, live up to expectations.) Where does one start? In what office, with what operation?

Maybe it's a hare-brained solution, but how about the CNMI declaring bankruptcy? And having the court appoint an administrator? One who can't be fired, or bought, or bribed, to take over as a sort of "city administrator," whose assignment would be to get government agencies back in shape, to function as they should? The administration, the legislature would be put on hold, with the "city administrator" given emergency powers to do whatever necessary to bring the CNMI to the point where it could operate fairly, openly, effectively. A pretty daunting task, but no more so than what has faced the administration, a task it has shown itself unable to accomplish. At least with a court-appointed and -supported administrator, there wouldn't be questions of nepotism, favoritism, politics, corruption, to get in the way of proper operation of government services. S/he might even be willing to listen to and accommodate people with good ideas, to learn from those whose opinions differ, and to develop a cooperative approach to change, unlike the corporate mind-set that seems to be in effect at the moment.

\*\*\*

Short takes:

Maybe it's civility. Or maybe it's politeness, decorum. Or ethics? Whatever it is, it seems sorely lacking from the pages of the *Variety's* letters to the editor pages. In fact, the only criteria mentioned is that they be signed by the real author, though those in support of particular political candidates are "discouraged." Which may explain why a letter so abusive, so insulting, so personally vituperative as that written by House member Stanley Torres appeared in this past Wednesday's issue. Of course, it doesn't say much for Torres that he would write such things. But it doesn't say much for the *Variety* that it would print such things, either.

\*

Hopefully this is not as far-fetched as some of the ideas floated by the administration, but what would happen if revenue-generating agencies, such as the Commonwealth Health Center, the Department of Labor, or Northern Marianas College, were allowed to keep substantial portions of their monies within their agencies, to pay for their equipment, operations, staffing? Wouldn't that give them an incentive to go out and collect the monies due them, in the case of CHC, for example? Would that inspire more of them to seek grant support? Has anyone even looked at the question?

\*

The news that the Marianas Visitors Authority will not sponsor the XTERRA event this coming year, after doing so for six years in a row, comes as somewhat of a shock. Reportedly, MVA made the decision because it had not yet received its '08 budget from the administration. Is this another case where an agency might function better if it got to keep some of its revenue? Or is this a ploy, an attempt to force the legislature to appropriate additional funds? Or symptomatic of the disintegration of services mentioned above? It's hard to believe the MVA could not find corporate sponsors to guarantee the initial cost of hosting the event.

\*

What is it with the local papers that despite the presence of numerous high-ranking clergy from off-island, the Cathedral overflowing with parishioners and well-wishers, and Catholicism the predominant religion on island, not a single word was devoted to the ordination this past Sunday of Father Jesse Tudela Reyes, only the fifth CNMI priest to be ordained in the islands' history? The *North Star*, the Diocese' weekly bulletin, was full of the news, and pictures, but the local papers? Not a peep. For shame!

\*

And what is it with poker parlor owners that they haven't yet adopted the simple solution posted recently for avoiding theft: buy safes, anchor them to the floor, and keep no more than \$100 in cash on hand. Do they think their staff are expendable, or something?

\*

New movies this week: "Fantastic 4-Rise of the Silver Surfer" and "Nancy Drew," both PG. For a total of four PG's, three PG-13's and only one R. Are we actually paying attention to the fact that school is out?????