

On My Mind  
12/7/07

Unofficial as it may be, at least this time there is an appropriate observance of the December 7 holiday, as opposed to so many others, when nothing at all is scheduled. The march scheduled for this afternoon - to protest the legislature's latest attempt to put off criticism of the CNMI's labor situation, to support the "federalization" of labor and immigration policies, and in support of a grandfathering clause to improve the status of long-term workers - would seem quite in keeping with celebration of the CNMI's Constitution Day.

This is the day (more precisely, December 5<sup>th</sup>, but that's another story) on which the document that guarantees the people of the Commonwealth the right to free speech, and to peaceably assemble in support thereof - which will be demonstrated this afternoon - and which serves as the backbone, the support, the legal infrastructure, so to speak, of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, was formally signed by members of the CNMI's First Constitutional Convention.

One might cavil that the distance to be covered is too long, that representative-elect Tina Sablan seems to have usurped leadership from the originators of the idea and the issues, but nonetheless, it is an opportunity to make a statement about human dignity and reasonableness in labor relations. I do not expect to be able to finish, but I do expect to be there, and I would urge all like-minded individuals to participate as well.

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Among the more unintelligent things Representative Stanley T. Torres has done in the past, the recent introduction of a bill to tax wine-tastings ranks high indeed. Sharing the honors, I regret to say, are Representatives Joseph Deleon Guerrero, Arnold I. Palacios, Candido B. Taman and Ramon A. Tebuteb, all of whom co-sponsored a bill to "amend the Alcoholic Beverage Control Act" which, even more regrettably, has now become Public Law 15-115. Apparently seen as a revenue-generating measure, the law would, among other things, micro-manage how wine-tastings are done. It is obvious that no consultation was ever held with either sponsors or attendees of wine-tastings, that no one voting on the measure ever attended, or understood the conduct of, such procedures. Nor were any hearings held, any committee reports on the bill issued, by either the House or the Senate.

As is often the case with bills passed into law by the CNMI legislature, enforcement would be a problem. There is also the interesting provision in the law that "sampling means activity in which an alcoholic beverage is sampled or tasted for free." Is the law meant to target only charitable events, where wine sampling is sometimes conducted as part of a fund-raising drive of one sort or

another? Weird, since most wine tastings I've heard about do charge a fee for attendance.

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Far more egregious than Stanley's wine-tasting bill is House Bill 15-322, the so-called "Tourism Entertainment and Destination Enhancement Act of 2007," introduced by Representative Justo Quitugua, and already passed by the full house. The bill would allow both what it calls "video lottery terminals"(read poker machines), and baccarat, Black Jack, and Texas Hold'em card games to be played on Saipan - a stinging slap in the face to the many people on Saipan who decisively voted AGAINST such gambling just five weeks ago. Nor can any amount of semantic game-playing alter the fact that this bill seeks to do what the voters defeated at the polls: permit casino gambling in the CNMI.

The bill would reserve part of the proceeds for scholarships, but as a - frustrated member of the Public School System has put it in lamenting the lack of funding for PSS, "there can be no scholarships without scholars, and no scholars without education and no education without adequate funding of PSS."

The bill may sink under its own provisions, however. Though it would permit VLT's in hotels, it would limit the card games to the San Roque Fiesta mall, which, I am told, would take millions to rehabilitate, given past neglect. It requires an annual \$1,500,000 fee for one of the card games, on top of which a 20% gaming tax is proposed on net proceeds, on top of which the local delegation would be authorized to impose additional fees. Are there really people with that kind of money out there who would be willing to invest it on Saipan, which can't even promise a reliable power supply?

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Short takes:

The deadline for removing campaign signs has long since passed, and while a few small ones can still be found, none is as obvious as Senator Luis P. Crisostomo's hard-to-miss sign at the juncture of Middle Road and Airport Road. He may, as has been alleged, have bought his seat in the new House, but has he also been that successful in buying off the law?

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The *Saipan Tribune* has done it again: excelled in its choice of content for its Opinion page by re-printing in its 12/01 issue the article "To win the peace, restore the Corps" - a reference to the Peace Corps - that first appeared in the *Baltimore Sun*. The article makes a persuasive argument that though the U.S. may win the war on the battlefield, it hasn't been very good at winning the peace, and that the most effective solution would be to once again make use of Peace Corps volunteers.

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The new issue of *MP* magazine features a lengthy article on nuclear energy and its potential for the CNMI. I found it neither as clear and focussed nor as easy to follow as I would have expected from Dr. Arkle, but perhaps I expect too much. The concept would appear to be sound, however.

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To those who might have worried about where the money collected by the CNMI's Salvation Army volunteers go, I have been assured by Captain Tom Taylor of the Guam office that what is collected stays on island and is used to meet the needs of on-island residents. The Saipan office is headed by Wayne Gillespie, retired U.S.A.F., but I've not yet been able to make contact with him.

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Did anyone else pick up on the suggestion made by Guam's former Senator Tom Ada, that as an interim solution to Guam's lack of dump space, Guam could ask the CNMI if it would be willing to allow Guam's trash to be shipped to the CNMI, since its landfill has extra capacity due to the closure of its garment factories? The story ran in the 12/04 issue of the *Pacific Daily News*.

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Another of those laws that isn't being enforced, but would take massive manpower to be enforced, is the fireworks law. Selling to underage children is, supposedly, illegal, but you can't tell me that all those thunder bombs going off in my neighborhood are being bought by adults.

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There's the Tuesday market at the Garapan fishing base, and the Thursday market along Hotel Row, and now there's going to be a Wednesday market at the former Chamolinian Village site. Can THREE street markets really be sustained? Did the Carolinian Office even consider sharing with one of the other two already established night markets?

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I don't mean to single out the *Tribune* - I do read both local papers - but once again, it is the *Trib* which deserves special mention, together with author Bill Stewart, of course, for the series on WWII's first exchange of enemy diplomats. I'd never run across mention of any of the material before, and it sure made for fascinating reading! Thanks to both author and paper!

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I'm not sure whether it's my imagination, or just that I'm listening at different hours, but KRNM does seem to have gotten numerous (U.S.) National Public Radio shows back on air including NPR news. On the other hand, yesterday's discussion on Radio Australia of expanding tourism in Papua New Guinea and the focus on eco-tourism (sorry - I don't remember on which show) was certainly pertinent to issues faced by the CNMI in developing its tourism industry.

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New movies: only one, "Golden Compass," an adventure/drama rated PG-13, for a total of one G, one PG, 3 PG-13's and two R's.