

On My Mind
12/21/07

Here's a Christmas present for all those who align themselves with the U.S. mainland Democratic Party: If you are a U.S. citizen, now you can vote in the primaries too! Since the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) went into effect, U.S. citizens living in the Marianas who've ever had a resident address on the U.S. mainland (or Alaska or Hawaii) have been eligible to vote, using absentee ballots, in the federal election for president.

Now an organization called Democrats Abroad has joined VoteFromAbroad.org to help register those absentee voters who already are, or want to join, the U.S. Democratic Party, so that they can vote in the primary as well.

According to an article in the web's www.globeandmail.com, "Unlike Republicans Abroad, whose members must still vote by absentee ballot in their home states, Democrats Abroad is recognized as an official branch of the Democratic National Committee, and will send 22 delegates to the party's convention in August, putting its influence on par with states like Idaho (23) and North Dakota (21)."

It does not cost anything to join the U.S. Democratic Party. All you have to do is fill out the form provided at www.VoteFromAbroad.org and where it asks for political party preference, enter "Democrat." (If you're not a Democrat, that's OK. You can leave it blank, or fill in "Republican" - and still use the form to register to vote absentee in next year's presidential election.) The form can be filled out on-line, but it must be printed out and sent via snail mail. It can also be faxed, but even so, a hard copy must also be sent. The site provides the correct address and phone number for whatever state you indicated was your residence on the mainland.

Since some Democratic primaries are being held very early next year, the sooner people register, the more certain they will be to get a chance to vote in them. My thanks to Fred Radewagon for alerting me to this service.

Unfortunately, there's also a piece of coal in everyone's stocking this year in the announcement of the resignation of Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Insular Affairs from the Department of Interior. It was, I think, a shock to everyone here, who probably expected, as I did, that he would stay in office at least until the federal immigration bill was passed by the U.S. House and Senate and signed by the President, and maybe even until some equivalent of "grandfathering" was provided for CNMI's foreign workers. But it was not to be. Cohen had, apparently, been itching to get back to a more normal life style (his wife is a film producer in California), and is saying that he is confident not only that the immigration bill will pass, but also that his successor, and his agency, are

committed to following through to implement it as promised.

Nonetheless, his departure is sad news indeed. Cohen is the first, in a long line of Department of Interior officials sent to the CNMI since its inception, who took the time, made the effort to understand, first hand, what its needs, concerns and issues were, made sure to identify all its stakeholders (as opposed to a select few). He was also the first to take an active role in seeking and facilitating paths toward solution - all undertaken with courage, honesty, integrity. This alone is enough to give cause to mourn his departure.

Moreover, he is a man of many talents, many skills, many interests - often revealed at unexpected times - all of which he employs aptly and fully in the accomplishment of his mission. He is conscientious, works hard, takes his work seriously, and cares deeply about the issues - and the people - involved. He is personable, approachable, likeable - traits that he does not reserve only for personal individual interactions, but applies in his professional contacts as well. These, too, are reasons to mourn his departure.

That our illustrious governor has not been able to benefit from these many sterling attributes - hoping for "a more positive and constructive relationship with the Office of Insular Affairs under a different, more capable, reasonable and responsible leadership - one that genuinely respects the needs of our islands" - to quote from yesterday's *Marianas Variety* - does not speak very well for the governor, particularly since those very traits describe Cohen and his tenure rather well, as a matter of fact.

Cohen is not due to leave until the end of January. What a coup if the Congress would pass, and the President sign, CNMI's federalization bill before his departure! We join Resident Representative Pete A. Tenorio who ended his eloquent tribute to Cohen (the full text appears in today's *Trib*) by saying thank-you for all that Cohen has done to help the people of the insular areas. We wish him well in his new life as a practicing attorney in California. And we thank him too, for his many kindnesses to yours truly.

Short takes:

It's probably not fitting to be cynical at this time of year, but I must say it came as somewhat of a surprise that the CNMI Senate actually turned down Representative Justo A. Quitugua's outrageous bill to turn La Fiesta into a gaming center - particularly after the coconut wireless' many messages that Rota and Tinian senators were sure to be bought off. (That Quitugua even introduced such a bill was a bigger surprise - in fact, a shock.) It's true that what the Senate did was logical, and honorable. But those characteristics are not typical of its members. So I have to ask: will their action hold? Time will tell.

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The Commonwealth Utilities Corporation has put out a very interesting "Request for Proposal" (see page 37 of today's *Saipan Tribune*). It asks for

proposals to provide the design, installation, operation and ownership of renewable energy generation facilities for Rota, Tinian and Saipan using either solar photovoltaics, or wind, wave or tidal energy - having identified those as technically and financially feasible. Proposals are due February 25, 2008. That's certainly a step in the right direction. But one wonders who within CUC has the knowledge and expertise to evaluate the responses, and what criteria will be used to do so. One also wonders why the scope was so narrow. Why not include bio-fuel? Or nuclear energy? As long as ideas are being sought, why limit them? At least this time there do not seem to be any fees affiliated with the process!

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Speaking of criteria, does anyone know what criteria were used to identify those poor government employees who will, apparently, be terminated this week? Is it that they did not hold real jobs to begin with, and no one wants to admit it? Regardless, the governor's Scrooge-like decision to terminate them just before Christmas, not to mention using them as blackmail, is disgraceful and unbecoming (definition: "not in accord with the standards implied by one's character or position." *Am. Heritage College Dictionary*.)

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I cannot comment on the Public School System's budget problems. I do not know enough about the issues. I can comment though, that as a result of those budget problems, a long-time and highly-skilled professional PSS employee was thrown into the classroom with no training and no support, and rather than continue under the resulting stress, has resigned from PSS and is leaving island. Not good - for the teacher, for the students, for PSS, for the CNMI.

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Suggestion to the *Trib*: why not run the clock on the time it takes the CNMI Supreme Court to come up with its full, written ruling on the redistricting question? It's already been more than four months since the slip opinion was issued. Why is it important? So those who might want to appeal can identify the grounds on which to do so.

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Last but not least: in keeping with the holiday season, may your days be merry and bright, and may the new year bring you peace, hope, and good fortune.

FOUR new movies this week: 2 R's, 1 PG-13 and 1 PG, for a total of 2 R's, 3 PG-13's, 2 PG's and no G's - not a very user-friendly ratio for the holiday season when all the schools are out, though the *Trib* does say the line-up is good only through Monday, 12/24.