

On My Mind
04/08/08

The TaoTao Tano group - or at least its president - may claim it speaks for all the people of the CNMI, but it sure doesn't speak for this one! Particularly not when it unleashes yet another of its random fusillades (fusillade: a rapid outburst or barrage, as of insults, according to the *American Heritage College Dictionary*, this time against a particularly undeserving target. In a letter to the editor printed in the *Marianas Variety* earlier this week the president of Taotao Tano attacks Guam congressional delegate Madeleine Bordallo for supporting H.R. 3079, the so-called "federalization" bill now awaiting congressional action, for being in collusion with others in pursuit of dismantling the CNMI's Covenant, for "disrespecting and discriminating the people" of the CNMI.

He goes so far as to claim no one in the CNMI has authorized her to speak on behalf of the people of the CNMI, and that no one wants her to do so.

To the contrary, sir! Madeleine Bordallo has been an invaluable ally! She has a voice in Congress, as the CNMI does not yet have, and she has, time and time and time again, been willing to include the CNMI - its concerns, its needs - in her representations to the members of Congress, despite the fact that she is under no obligation to do so. She was elected to represent the people of Guam.

Nonetheless, she makes it a point to be informed about the interests of the CNMI, she supports and works with the CNMI's Washington Representative to make sure the CNMI is heard from on relevant issues, she reminds Congress at every opportunity that the CNMI should not be overlooked on matters that affect the welfare of the people of the CNMI.

I am sure many others share my admiration and respect for, and gratitude to Congresswoman Bordallo for taking the time and making the effort to support the needs of the CNMI in addition to her primary duties of representing the people of Guam. I hope they too will offer her an apology, as I do herewith, for the uncalled-for attack.

Repeated experience and observation make it clear that getting into battles in print rarely clarifies anything - it only makes matters worse. But this wrong was too egregious to ignore. Of course, there is the question of whether the TaoTao Tano letter should even have been published. It is an incendiary, inflammatory, insulting personal attack. While the *Saipan Tribune* has a plainly worded policy that "Letters that are critical should focus on issues, not personalities," the *Variety*, regrettably, has nothing similar.

No doubt the *Variety* will claim that it publishes such things in the interests of freedom of expression, freedom of the press. I would argue that particularly in this community, where confrontation violates the cultural norm, such ideals

warrant flexibility and restraint. As a pro-active journalist, I would also contend that what society needs right now is more civility, not less.

Not quite so egregious ("conspicuously bad or offensive," according to the *AHCD*), perhaps, is the increasingly heavy-handed attempt, by two off-island "consultants/special advisors," to persuade one and all that the local labor bill passed by the previous legislature is good, workable, and sufficiently punitive to foreign workers to satisfy the most parochial of local residents.

The couple, formerly highly respected and admired, appear to have succumbed to the wiles of the likes of Willie Tan for reasons that are murky, at best. Rumor has it that they've provided even TaoTao Tano with ammunition and support. Surely it isn't solely pride of authorship that prompts the two to so visibly go to such lengths to defend so problematic a document?

Doesn't it strike anyone else as strange that it isn't the legislators who passed it, the governor who signed it, either the businesses or members of the local work force who theoretically are supposed to benefit from it, who are lobbying the media, and, through the media, everyone else?

The lobbying, moreover, appears to be an all-out effort. One source put it this way: "In recent weeks the Fitial Administration, his 'special advisors,' lobbyists, and those with financial and political interests in perpetuating the corrupt local labor and immigration system in the CNMI, have led an organized campaign of lies and misinterpretation against this legislation. Their campaign started in the CNMI and has spread to Washington, D.C. They have called for the bill [H.R. 3079] to be removed from the [U.S. Senate] Omnibus bill and to be heard separately."

It would appear, in other words, that there's money enough somewhere in the CNMI to hire lobbyists, to mount a campaign of "lies and misinterpretation," to support special advisors and others both here and in Washington D.C. - yet there's so little money in the CNMI that the Commonwealth Health Center cannot hire enough pharmacists to adequately serve hospital patients; the administration cannot pay its debts to the Retirement Fund, forcing it to restrict who can retire and a possible cessation of government health insurance; teachers remain underpaid; CIP projects remain on hold.....

To paraphrase the comments by the *Variety's* Zaldy Dandan in today's issue, the governor would appear to be so adamant in his opposition to the bill because he would lose the immense political clout that goes along with the ability to tell companies how many foreign workers they can hire and when to hire them, which in turn, would dampen, if not eliminate, the investors' deep sense of gratitude and generosity towards the governor. Moreover, writes Dandan, with passage of the federal labor and immigration bill, it would no longer be possible to

amend or repeal a labor and immigration bill to suit short-term political interests, every time a new governor were elected - more grounds for objection by the governor and his cronies.

Those interested in countering this adverse lobbying effort might want to send letters, faxes, e-mails, to the office of the Washington Rep, for forwarding to appropriate members of Congress and federal officials. E-mail: <rep@resrep.gov.mp>, fax: 202-673-5873.

Short takes:

Kudos to Peleliu Delegate Jonathan Isechal of Palau's House of Delegates for introducing a bill that would require cabinet ministers to have a bachelor's degree and have been a resident of Palau for five years. Of course, it hasn't passed yet, but it's a start.

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Local businessman Tony Pellegrino also merits kudos this week for his creative proposal in Monday's *Trib* to use an empty garment factory as training ground for vocational education students. The students would be expected to prepare the building for use as classrooms, and to maintain the facilities thereafter. The school would find trainee jobs for students as well as provide academic instruction.

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Katie Busenkell's suggestion, in Thursday's *Trib* to use the about-to-be vacated adult prison facility in Susupe as an animal shelter and the prisoners as animal caretakers is also very creative, and worth considering.

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Those concerned by the taking of two large wrasses recently might want to read Mike Tripp's blog on the subject. He proposes that where wrasse are taken, and which ones, should depend on how tourism would be affected by the particular taking. A thoughtful and well-reasoned approach. The site: <www.saipanscuba.blogspot.com>.

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I was flattered by those who have asked me what had happened to my column, since it has not appeared the last few weeks. But at the same time, I was not so flattered to realize that those same people had either not read, or had already forgotten, that I had noted, in the last column that did appear, that I would be taking a month's break.

The hope was that the time would allow me to begin to bring order to the many piles of random papers that surround me. That has not happened, but at least an approach to the task has evolved, which should help some.

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Last but not least, "Kung Hei Fat Choi!"