

On My Mind

1/29/10

Fortunately for the CNMI, yesterday's President's State of the Union speech did not require getting up in the middle of the night - it was broadcast, live, in the middle of the day. Given the challenges he faces, I thought President Obama did a remarkable job of reigniting the hope, dedication and commitment that marked his campaign and his inauguration. While he admitted his failings and shortcomings, he focused on solving the problems that still exist, on offering solutions. Among them: "We should start where most new jobs do -- in small businesses, companies that begin when an entrepreneur takes a chance on a dream, or a worker decides it's time she became her own boss. Through sheer grit and determination, these companies have weathered the recession and they're ready to grow."

He pointed out that, "From the day I took office, I've been told that addressing our larger challenges is too ambitious; such an effort would be too contentious....that we should just put things on hold for a while. For those who make these claims, I have one simple question: How long should we wait? How long should America put its future on hold?"

Much of what he said about issues and solutions, applies to state level politics as well. For example: "[But] what frustrates the American people is a Washington where every day is Election Day. We can't wage a perpetual campaign where the only goal is to see who can get the most embarrassing headlines about the other side....Neither party should delay or obstruct every single bill just because they can. The confirmation of - I'm speaking to both parties now - the confirmation of well-qualified public servants shouldn't be held hostage to the pet projects or grudges of a few individual senators. We were sent here to serve our citizens, not our ambitions. So let's show the American people that we can do it together."

He reminded those listening that "...it's our ideals, our values that built America ... values that drive our citizens still. Every day, Americans meet their responsibilities to their families and their employers. Time and again, they lend a hand to their neighbors and give back to their country. They take pride in their labor, and are generous in spirit. These aren't Republican values or Democratic values that they're living by; business values or labor values. They're American values. ... Each time lobbyists game the system or politicians tear each other down instead of lifting this country up, we lose faith. The more that TV pundits reduce serious debates to silly arguments, big issues into sound bites, our citizens turn away. No wonder there's so much cynicism out there. No wonder there's so much disappointment. "

"But remember this -- I never suggested that change would be easy, or that I could do it alone. Democracy in a nation of 300 million people can be noisy and messy and complicated. And when you try to do big things and make big changes, it stirs passions and controversy. That's just how it is."

He said, of course, a great deal more. The full text is available on

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/01/27/state-of-the-union-2010-full-text-transcript_n_439459.html>, among other sites.

As is so often the case, particularly in the CNMI, what appear to be simple problems aren't always all that simple. More is at issue in dealing with illegal taxis, for example, than just competition. According to the coconut wireless, there are approximately 40 illegal taxis out there, efficiently providing service at reasonable prices - \$3/person for the Chinese, \$5/ person for all others. That could be said to be good, but the other side isn't as pretty.

The biggest flaw is the extent to which those taxis have become an outlet for stolen goods, as well as a means for distributing "ice." According to the coconut wireless, a majority of the "ladies of the night" - who are the system's main clients - are themselves on ice, and are also the main promoters of the merchandise to their clients.

Then there's the problem of police protection. Those taxis would not be able to operate without the connivance of corrupt officials.

Which leaves the poor pedestrian, in wanting to travel at a more reasonable rate, faced with the dilemma of paying the exorbitant fee charged by legitimate taxis or running the risk of confronting an ice dealer.

Perhaps the best first step would be for the legislature - or the Department of Commerce? - to re-evaluate the law and/or the rules governing taxi operation and find ways to lower operational costs, so taxis could lower their rates. At lower rates, their business would increase, and that might begin to drive some of the illegal taxis out of business.....

Of course, if one were to deprive the illegal taxis of their alleged major source of income - i.e., the aforesaid "ladies of the night" - that might help too.

In the meantime, the legitimate NMI Taxi Association is to be commended for its efforts to make its services more accessible to patrons. The *Marianas Variety*'s 1/26 issue reports that the NTA is considering establishing separate stations around the island in order to provide better serve to the community.

Short takes:

Kudos to the *Saipan Tribune* for providing readers a complete list of members of the legislature - including e-mail addresses, even! Its contribution in helping to make the legislature transparent - or at least accessible - is much appreciated!

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What kind of standard does it reflect when violating federal law is dismissed as being "good for a laugh" - as was done in a letter defending the governor's role in 'maseuse-gate' that appeared in Thursday's *Saipan Tribune*?

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The Zoning Board is extending its deadline for "expressions of interest" in its car-removal program. Maybe if what was involved were more clearly explained, it would get more response? To wit, first the zoning board would certify the cars in question as legally available for pick-up (through cooperation with the Department of Public Safety and the Bureau of Motor Vehicles). Only then would responders be expected to pick up the cars, and process them for re-cycling, shipping of-island, or what-have-you.

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Isn't it ironic that Guam's non-voting delegate to Congress is now campaigning to have the promised Marianas Trench information center located on Guam rather than the CNMI - when it was this same non-voting delegate who led Guam's protests, and that of Guam's fishermen, against establishing the national marine monument to begin with?

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The latest *Commonwealth Register* (volume 31, #1) contains only three items: a governor's office declaration of emergency regarding Tinian Harbor; a notice of concurrence and authorization to proceed regarding Tinian Harbor; and AG Opinion 2010-01 regarding private attorney service as an appointed member of CNMI government boards, commissions and task forces, which was triggered by an informal verbal opinion that held that Janet King could not retain her private law practice while serving as a member of the Northern Marianas College Board of Regents. The AG opinion found the Government Code of Ethics did not prohibit private attorneys from serving on such boards and commissions.

Oddly enough, this issue contains no notice of an emergency in any of the Northern Islands - which appearance had, heretofore, foreclosed resettlement there; nor did it contain any emergency orders regarding CUC. No one was available with whom to clarify the omissions as this was being written.

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A former legislator gave an interesting answer to my question as to how one could move proposed legislation from committee to the floor for action. Briefly, he said, "The legislature is not a single solid entity, but is composed of parts (House, Senate, Delegations, Legislative Bureau) and sub-parts (committees, sub-committees, conference committees, ad hoc committees) and each "zealously (or perhaps jealously) guards its own sphere of influence." Not to mention members who are also representatives to other organizations - all of which "influence the ebb and flow of the legislature."

Further, he said, "The Legislature and its sub-parts take on the personality of the people who hold those offices, [and] it depends on ... the respective personality of the person who chairs the committee....Some chairs are hyper sensitive to public comments and public perception. Some chairs adhere to the party agenda and only push the party platform. Some chairs focus their efforts in their precinct as they view their primary role is to constituents. Etc, etc, etc."

All of which I thought quite helpful.....