

On My Mind  
6/4/99

If someone brings bad news, it serves no purpose to "kill the messenger" - the bad news is still out there. But if someone brings false news, it could serve a purpose to "kill the messenger," for it would forewarn others also tempted to spread falsehoods.

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What does that have to do with anything? Well, it has to do with ABC's 20/20 false and misleading report on the labor situation in the CNMI. Most of the reaction and response by CNMI officials have been against the substance, the content, of the show. Effort has concentrated on showing that even if some of the allegations were true at one time, they no longer are - that things have changed, that conditions have improved, and that more change and more improvements are under way.

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Only marginally has there been criticism of the so-called investigative reporter, much less the producers of the show, or the show's sponsors, or the network that carries it. Yet in this case, criticism of all of the above - who are, in effect, the messengers - would be fully justified. It is irresponsible journalism to issue such a biased report. It violates journalism ethics to show scenes so blatantly out of context. It makes a mockery of professional integrity to ignore fact and truth, to continue broadcasting such exaggerations of old news.

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CNMI officials might want to consider aiming some of their counter-attacks at the media, rather than the message - at the messenger, in other words, that is bringing the alleged bad news. Dissecting the report to point out specific out-of-context scenes, specific mis-truths and exaggerations - frankly calling into question the credibility of the show's reporter, producer, sponsor and network - might be a much more effective tactic than trying, once again, to persuade those who don't want to see, that they should take an honest look at what is in front of them.

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If 20/20 were to lose its credibility, people would no longer take seriously what is reported on the show, which would, in the long run, make the position of the CNMI, or any other victim of its sensationalistic reporting, that much easier.

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Washington Representative Juan N. Babauta's insightful analysis of why the CNMI is suddenly under attack from so many different angles in Congress was certainly informative, helpful - but also disheartening. Babauta said, in his annual report to the Commonwealth yesterday, that so many bills to curtail the CNMI's authority over its own immigration and labor policies are being introduced in the U.S. Congress because the CNMI has become, in the eyes of Congress, allied with specific political party interests. The CNMI has, as a result, become a political football, whereas before it had been viewed as apolitical, non-aligned, and therefore of interest only to those Congressional subcommittees charged with responsibility for island matters.

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No longer are CNMI concerns being addressed on a bipartisan basis by Congressmen knowledge-

able about the CNMI, familiar with island issues and concerns. Now every Congressman with remotely related interests, and no knowledge of the islands, is trying to get into the act, to gain public attention and political favor, by introducing bills that appear to endorse so-called American values - but at the expense of the CNMI's economy and well-being. According to Babauta, this unfortunate situation has been brought about by the previous administration's Washington strategy, and, some assert, the public relations firm of Preston Gates et al.

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The question now is, can the CNMI re-establish its stance of political neutrality, recoup its bipartisan support, in Washington, in Congress? And if so, how? There don't seem to be any easy answers. But if anyone can bring it off, it's the present governor, with his non-confrontational stance, with his reliance on multi-faceted task forces, with his willingness to discuss, negotiate, cooperate, and with the collegial relationship he has established with a cooperative House and Senate, with the Washington Rep.

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Probably unintentionally, the Governor's closing comment, in his State of the Commonwealth address yesterday, provides strong endorsement to Congressman Hofschneider's efforts to establish a marine sanctuary at Managaha. The governor said that "we must recognize that what we do today...is so important to our children's future, " that "their future, and the future of our islands, depend so much on the choices we make today."

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The idea of a marine sanctuary, an area where fishing and water sports would be curtailed if not prohibited altogether, is not easy to sell, particularly to commercial interests more intent on the immediate income provided by use of the area than on the long-term survival of the area's attractions.

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But protection of the marine environment - and particularly of its reefs - is critical not only to the health and survival of the immediate surroundings; it is also critical to the health and survival of marine environments everywhere else. As the author of "The Enchanted Braid," Osha G. Davidson, explains, reefs are the heart of the marine environment. They provide shelter to spawning corals and to breeding fish, a nursery to young fish and home to mature fish and other creatures of the sea, they serve as footholds for soft corals, and they themselves are a source of food as well.

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When a reef dies, or is destroyed - by careless anchoring, by dynamiting, by sedimentation - every creature dependent on the reef will also eventually die. Everything from fish, shrimp and lobsters to shellfish, eels, turtles, and starfish will disappear. For without shelter, without food, they cannot survive.

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But that is not all. Coral reefs have an international interdependency. Coral larvae spawned in one part of the world are carried to other parts of the world by ocean currents. If - as theoretical example - coral larvae from the CNMI settle along the reefs of Hawaii, and Hawaii's reefs

become damaged, the CNMI's larvae could bring new life to the Hawaiian reefs. But if the CNMI's reefs were to die, Hawaii's reefs would not recover, for there'd be no new source of coral.

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The Washington Rep concluded his presentation with a similar sentiment. From time to time, we need to look beyond today, he said, to envision the future we want for ourselves and our children. Establishing marine sanctuaries is a good example of doing just that: envisioning the future we want for our children, and taking steps now to assure its realization.

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The establishment of a marine sanctuary in the CNMI is long overdue. Considerable reef has already been destroyed, as any fisherman can confirm. A sanctuary, where all species of marine life can be protected while they again increase in numbers, is urgently needed - not merely to improve harvesting from the sea for local fishermen or to restore the coral reef diversity that attracts the tourist, but perhaps more importantly, to preserve the species.

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While the CNMI's Office of the Attorney General may not be able to pursue claims of over-pricing in shipping charges by carriers serving the CNMI, perhaps the same obstacles - projected high costs of litigation and lack of funds - would not stand in the way of investigating the high cost of mortgages in the CNMI.

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Shipping is an international business, and involves huge, moneyed companies. According to press reports, Guam, which is also contesting the high cost of shipping, has already spent \$6 million on the issue, and has yet to see any dividends. But as far as mortgage rates - set by banks - go, at least two of the banks in the CNMI are local (if one may refer to Bank of Guam as local), involving only island interests.

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Guam banks are advertising mortgage rates considerably lower than those available through CNMI banks - even when one is a branch of the other. This, too, would appear to be discriminatory pricing which should be investigated.

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Grammar lesson for the day: The noun "legislation" does not require the indefinite article "a." It is not "Senator x introduced a legislation today," but "Senator x introduced legislation today." The Senator may introduce a bill, but not a legislation.