

On My Mind
12/8/00

Today marks the 24th anniversary of the signing of the CNMI Constitution. It is being observed with no fanfare, no announced ceremonies, no apparent special observances - except, of course, that it is a government holiday. Happy Constitution Day!

<center>* * *</center>

We're barely a month away from the end of the year 2000, and, as some pundits would have had us believe, from the beginning of the new millennium. But this time around the media seem too pre-occupied with ballot court battles to pay attention to such pedantry, to pick up, search out, report on millennium observances that will be taking place this year instead of last.

If I'd understood it, I'd repeat the rationale that was used to justify that belief, but I did not, so cannot. As I recall, it had to do with how one counts, and where counts begin, though that could be wrong.

I'm assuming that those who argued that last year's celebrations were in error still believe that, and still expect to hold millennium observances this New Year's. It is unsettling to be reminded, once again, how little I really know about what is going on elsewhere in the world, how dependent I am on the media - rather than first-, or even second-hand (through friends and acquaintances) knowledge gathered on my own - for news outside my own small circle.

<center>* * *</center>

The Tinian Dynasty, according to a report in the local media, is arguing on what appears to be a technicality that it is not required to hook up to CUC power, and therefore, that it does not owe the fine imposed on it by the Coastal Resources Management Office (CRMO). From the looks of things, the technicality wouldn't take all that much to be resolved, and then the Tinian Dynasty will once again be faced with the CRMO citation.

It seems patently unfair to demand of the Dynasty that it pay full fare for its power at the same time that the CNMI is offering new developers all sorts of concessions and financial breaks if only they'll bring their projects to the CNMI. The Dynasty, opened with great fanfare several years ago, and valiantly trying to stay alive, is still operating at a loss thanks not only to the declining economy, but also to the long delay in the promised upgrade of Tinian runways, which would assuredly facilitate the increase in tourist traffic on which the hotel is so dependent. In addition, CUC's power rates are still higher than what it costs the Dynasty to produce power on its own.

The argument is being made that lowering CUC rates for the Dynasty will set a precedent that CUC cannot afford. The issue would not be nearly so critical if the CUC were in receipt of payment by the CNMI government of all its delinquent power bills. Moreover, it makes no sense to push towards bankruptcy a business that could generate considerable revenue for the

government if only the business were allowed to continue to operate.

<center>* * *</center>

On the other hand, with apparently no enticements, a group of Korean developers is trying to buy its way into the CNMI, holding forth once again on the supposed advantages to the CNMI if it allowed the group to establish one or more “shooting galleries” in the CNMI. The obvious question is, why is the group so eager to come here? What advantage to the group is there that it can’t find elsewhere? How is it that the CNMI must offer all kinds of concessions to entice developers, and yet this group is, instead, offering enticements to the CNMI? Is it that the CNMI is American soil? Do the Koreans believe that will give them an entree into the U.S. mainland? This situation doesn’t make much sense either.

Beyond that, the Koreans miss the point. They can offer all the assurances they are capable of making that the “shooting galleries” will be safe, prudently operated, that all possible cautionary measures will be taken - with the plant, the staff, the weapons - but that isn’t really where the problem with their proposal lies.

The problem lies in what happens to the weapons - and the ammunition - on their way to and from the port through which they arrive. Here they are under the control of CNMI government officials, not the operators of the galleries. There is no way the Korean developers can guarantee absolute control over that part of the operation. It is the weakest part of the whole proposal. There is, too, the proverbial ingenuity of the criminal mind. Even with all the safeguards imaginable - from chain fences to guard dogs to high-tech motion sensors - if crooks want access they will find the means, and weapons - to crooks - are about as desirable a contraband as there is.

<center>* * *</center>

Who is not sharing information with whom? Despite the fact that it was the height of irresponsibility for those South Carolinian (as in a state of the U.S., not the villagers of Tanapag) contractors to change the notation level for reporting PCB contamination of taro and yams, the fact remains that there is information out there that the level of contamination is negligible, and that a ban on the eating of yam and taro is not called for.

Yesterday’s headlines in the <I>Variety</I> warned residents about eating yams and taro. The story said a report by those South Carolinian consultants, which was commissioned by the CNMI Attorney General’s office and was then forwarded to the CNMI legislature, showed that tested yams and taro contained a high degree of PCB contamination.

However, a statement released by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on Monday of this week explains that the unfamiliar ug/kg notation used by the consultants is but a multiple of the more generally used mg/kg, and that the level of contamination is therefore not considered of concern. The local Department of Public Health, on the other hand, has said it cannot comment on a proposed ban since it has not seen the consultants’ report, though the cover letter accompa-

nying the report indicates that Public Health was indeed given a copy.

It seems unconscionable to me that such an irresponsible misstatement of facts has been given such prominence and received such widespread attention. It has caused anger, fear, suspicion, hostility, distrust among the villagers - and tension, to say the least, among other parties - a situation both unnecessary and counter-productive.

The question is: why has dissemination of clarifying information been so poorly done? Who has sat on information and why? Whom does it serve? What are the information "censors" trying to accomplish?

<center>* * *</center>

Speaking of unsubstantiated facts: have all 16,000 Chinese workers in the CNMI really amassed \$8,000 each in savings accounts? That was the figure credited to the manager of First Hawaiian Bank in a 12/1/00 story in the <I>Variety</I> about the workers' withdrawals in the face of a false tsunami scare. Most impressive - if it's true.....

<center>* * *</center>

Where censorship was sorely needed, but was unfortunately not forthcoming, was in the story by Ferdie de la Torre in Wednesday's <I>Variety</I>, in which he described, not once, not twice, but THREE times, the ugly facts of a rape case being heard in Superior Court.

De la Torre is apparently so enamored of the technique used against the victim, that he repeated the details - this time in bold face - the very next day.

Is it really necessary to reveal such sordid details? It offends my sensibilities, but doesn't it also constitute a disregard for, if not violation of, the rights of the victim?

Is the reporter so vicariously thrilled by the technique that he must repeat it in print again and again?

<center>* * *</center>

Unwarranted censorship, on the other hand, was exercised by the CNMI legislature when its members forced the Governor to present his annual State of the Commonwealth address - required by the Constitution and traditionally given orally - in written form so that the Washington Rep would not have an opportunity to publicly present his annual report to the legislature - also required by the Constitution. That, too, is unconscionable. The Governor's report was released earlier this month.