On My Mind 10/26/01

As the rhetoric gets louder, the ads get nastier, and the rallies ever more frantic, it's time to re-assure the voters that they have the right to vote in private, and that no one can, or should be able to, tell who voted for which candidate. Unlike some previous elections, where voters were told that marks on the ballot or the way that marks were made could be recognized, in this election, use of the new voting machine makes all that irrelevant.

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The machine can only detect the absence or presence of the filled-in oval. No other mark anywhere on the ballot (except, perhaps, too many filled- in ovals) will be recorded by the machine. Nor will such marks be seen by vote tellers. Which ovals voters fill in will only be known to the voters themselves, and to the machine.

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In addition to the ovals, there are two other differences in ballots this year. The ballots are printed on both sides, so voters must take care to examine and, if they so desire, mark appropriate ovals on both sides of the ballot. And the ballots are color-coded, according to party. But that doesn't mean one has to stay "within the lines/colors" in marking the ballots. Voters are free to pick and choose across party lines.

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And as seems clear from more recent election outcomes, more voters are making their choices based on merit, rather than party loyalty, family ties, free food, or other give-aways. There's no reason to expect this election to be any different.

What a pity, though, that some Senators have allowed self-interest to get in the way of the greatest good for the greatest number. Election Board Executive Director Greg Sablan asked the Legislature to extend the deadline for the receipt of absentee ballots by a week, to give all absentee ballots sufficient time to reach the CNMI in light of recent problems with the flow of U.S. mail.

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The House promptly passed a bill providing the asked-for extension, but Senate members, for some perverse reason of their own, decided to add a few unrelated - and not uncontroversial - amendments. With barely a week until elections, there's not enough time left for House consideration of the Senate changes - which, in effect, killed the bill.

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So now absentee voters have a slimmer chance of having their votes count. According to the story in the <I>Tribune</I>, Senators David Cing and Pete Reyes introduced the amendments, and all but Senators Thomas Villagomez and Ramon S Guerrero voted to approve them.

Senator Paul A. Manglona was reported as abstaining.

Now the Covenant Party has a "Covenant of Trust," and the Reform Party has a "contract" with

voters - the Covenant's spelled out in Friday's papers and the Reform's to be released Monday, October 29th. The Covenant Party's is a masterpiece of political rhetoric. Such bravado! Such egotism! Such puffery!

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It promises, for instance, that the law repealing a \$100,000 cash deposit for foreign investors will be repealed within the first 30 days of the 13th CNMI Legislature. That's quite a promise! Even if every one of the Covenant party's candidates for the legislature was elected - a doubtful assumption - and every one of them supported the bill - another doubtful assumption - it takes time for the House and Senate to organize, appoint their committees, etc.

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Even more rash is the promise that within 100 days, the CIP matching fund requirements for federal funds will be abolished. Isn't that a federally-imposed requirement? Does Fitial really think his consultant can buy off the entire Congress?

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Let's hope that the Democrat and Republican Party are more restrained in this last week before the election. It's deeds, not words, that count........

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I do not envy the people responsible for making sure that enough of the right kind of safety precautions are in place to protect the CNMI from the threats of terrorism being faced by people on the U.S. mainland. The requirements for changes in procedure, for more manpower, for additional supplies and equipment, are both extensive and expensive. A considerable amount of the cost will have to be borne by the CNMI. Is it all really necessary?

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On the one hand, not only is the CNMI small and remote, but neither does it pose any real threat to the Taliban or Iraq or other extremists, nor does it serve any vital national function - as in finance, or communication or transportation - nor does it house any major infrastructure such as reservoirs or nuclear power plants. The CNMI would not appear, in other words, to be a likely target for terrorism, either bio- or any other kind. It is too far off the beaten path. There are too many more inviting targets.

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On the other hand, what is there to say that some rabid terrorist will not find his or her way to the CNMI, and decide, independently or as part of some larger plan, to try carry out acts of terrorism against the people of the CNMI? And in case that does happen, wouldn't it be better to be prepared? Moreover, the CNMI is neighbor to Guam. And Guam does have military installations that can and do support operations in the Middle East. Thus, it is conceivable that terrorists might use the CNMI as a transit point for people or supplies to be used in acts of terrorism on Guam.

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Can there be degrees of preparedness? Can one derive statistics on the likelihood of the various acts of terrorism occurring in the CNMI? Is it possible to prioritize preparedness measures? Given that there has been so little experience here - or in the U.S. - with terrorism, solid answers to such questions probably are not available. That leaves government officials with the unenviable job of having to decide for themselves what needs protection and how to provide it.

I don't envy them.

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Ramadan, a month of prayer and fasting, and one of the Muslims' most holy of religious observations, begins November 15. It is obligatory for all but children, the sick and elderly, travelers, pregnant women and nursing mothers (if it will affect their health), and women "in menstruation."

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The entire Muslim community fasts during Ramadan in obedience to the command of Allah, to celebrate the gift of the Qur'an (Koran), as atonement, and as a means of gaining and expressing piety. During Ramadan Muslims are forbidden to eat after daybreak or before nightfall, and are required to pray at fixed times every day.

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Yet indications are that the U.S. will not cease its military attacks on Afghanistan during this most holy of Muslim observances.

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The U.S. has long been criticized for being insensitive to the realities of Middle Eastern life and culture - of which its dropping of American food unfamiliar and unpalatable to the Afghanistans is but the most recent example. Will the U.S. persist in its blindness and refuse to honor the Muslims' Ramadan? It would violate every canon Dale Carnegie, in his book "How to Win Friends and Influence People," and all the gurus thereafter have ever posited for gaining acceptance. Surely the U.S. will not be so stupid? After all, if the bombing is as effective as we are told it is, even the 30 days of Ramadan would not be enough to restore the Taliban's weaponry.