

On My Mind

3/22/02

Of course, it may have been the press, rather than actuality, that gave the impression that our leaders on Capitol Hill were in a panic as a result of the recent federal court ruling that the U.S. military's bombing of the CNMI's Farallon de Medinilla is in violation of the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Capitol Hill officials were quick to let it be known that they disagreed with the decision, that the ruling would kill the local economy, and that the CNMI should immediately offer its help to the military in filing a protest.

But as Attorney General Robert T. Torres pointed out, the CNMI is not even a party to the suit, which was filed by a non-government organization called the Center for Biological Diversity. Moreover, the ruling issued in the case is not final. In an attempt, apparently, to find a middle ground between defense needs and conservation interests, the judge asked both parties to respond to a list of thirteen questions regarding the issues, and has scheduled a hearing for April 30 "to discuss the proper remedy of this case."

Especially with all those legal counsel up there on the Hill, I would have expected a more moderate response - in fact, the more typical lawyerly statement that since the case is still under litigation, no comment would be offered - rather than the histrionics that some displayed. Is it possible that those legal counsel aren't being consulted? or listened to? or perhaps were not there to offer their counsel to begin with?

I guess one should be grateful that it wasn't a real crisis. And hope that there's some discussion, up there now, about how to respond to one should it come along.

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CNMI officials claim that the military bombing of Farallon de Medinilla contributes substantially to the CNMI economy, and that if the bombing were to cease, the negative impact would be very damaging. Yet it is not all that evident that this is so. Despite what Robert Underwood, Guam's non-voting delegate to the U.S. House of Representatives is quoted as saying, the pre-positioning ships that anchor off our shore make no use of Farallon de Medinilla. The Marines who come periodically to conduct maneuvers on Tinian make no use of Farallon de Medinilla. The destroyers and submarines that come to Saipan for R&R visits do not make use of Farallon de Medinilla. Those military do have an impact on the economy - but it is not related to whether or not birds are bombed on a northern island.

One theory goes that the R&R visits to the CNMI are "favors" being returned to the CNMI for CNMI's "favor" in letting the military bomb birds in Farallon de Medinilla. I can't quite see the U.S. Navy playing that sort of "tit for tat" game. To the contrary, in the broader picture it might enhance the CNMI's reputation if it were known for taking a strong stand in support of conservation. And that reputation could well have a positive influence on the tourism industry - a much larger contributor to the CNMI's economic welfare than the military.

Being mindful of our Rota Maharishi, there is also the argument that the way to peace is not found by promoting war. A CNMI stance in support of training for war will hurt rather than help the promotion of its tourist industry.

On the other hand, if the war hawks prevail, and Farallon de Medinilla's unique suitability as bombing target - reviewed at some length in the court's decision - is accepted by the Court, then the CNMI certainly has some powerful ammunition (no pun intended!) for going back to the negotiating table, and demanding a much larger payment from the U.S. for agreeing to allow its island and the birds thereon to be battered in the name of national defense and security.

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Another issue related to zoning, which last week's column should have identified as needing resolution, is the value placed on public land. In most instances, when a commodity becomes scarce, its value increases. With the CNMI's public lands, this does not seem to be the case - leases continue to be offered at bargain rates, and public land discounted against private land in land exchanges, even as the amount of public land becomes seriously depleted. The CNMI's remaining public land should be priced at a premium, not at give-away rates.

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Short (catty) takes:

Aren't the Marianas Visitor's Authority exit surveys reaching the wrong target? Those who answer the survey have already been here. But MVA's target, presumably, are those who did not come here. How can those who did answer for those who didn't?

Then there's the question of who did come. Are they typical of the tourists the CNMI wants more of? If recruitment efforts target similar types of tourists, isn't the CNMI allowing itself to be shaped by outsiders, rather than itself determining what kind of tourists it wants?

Yet again it is being proposed that Pagan be mined for its volcanic residue, pozzolan. Tinian Senator Jose Dela Cruz has written Governor Babauta urging that the CNMI issue a request for proposal for the work involved, according to a story in today's <I>Tribune</I>.

Pozzolan may be in high demand, but given that there's not even regular transportation to and from Pagan and anywhere else, much less housing, or power, or running water, it just doesn't make economic sense. The good Senator's concern regarding diversity in revenue generation is admirable, but something more realistic would be more helpful.

Maybe someone should post a list of bad ideas, so that they stop being revived so regularly?

A picture in the <I>Variety</I> this week showed what was labeled as a Police Major pinning insignia on a police officer promoted to colonel. The Major was wearing sandals and a dress that wasn't even knee-length. No explanation was given for this odd out-of uniform appearance.

Does it have to do with who outranks whom? Or with the off-duty role being given priority over the on-duty role? or?

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Aren't there better ways to build self esteem among teen-agers than having them participate in beauty contests? Beauty fades, and self-esteem built on appearances is not only shallow but temporary.

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A wall around the terminal building to protect it from explosions set off outside the terminal will be built on Saipan with FAA money. Being treated just like the states has some advantages, but in this case? Who needs it? Where's the perspective?

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Another candidate for the list of bad ideas: As was true with the last legislature, and the one before that, and the one before that, the proposal to reduce the number of Representatives to the House, to lengthen their term of office, to change from district to island-wide election, has again been introduced in the House. Should the matter be taken any more seriously this time than last? Is it really necessary to once again mount all the arguments against such a radical change?

Of course, it's easier now - one can just enter it on the message board provided by the new House on-line system.

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Tuesday is Covenant Day. How odd that even as government officials worry about preserving its terms, not yet has the CNMI come up with an appropriate annual observation of the signing of this seminal document.

CNMI's archivist once pulled together a series of very fitting Covenant forums. Perhaps they should be revived?