

On My Mind

8/2/01

Where is truth? Whom can we believe? What is the problem, anyway? The Secretary of Finance says there is cash to meet payroll through the end of the fiscal year. The Governor says that's not enough - more money is needed. The Speaker says that granting more is unconstitutional. The Governor says he doesn't care - he'll spend anyway, even if it does mean he'll go to jail. <I>(Wonder what there is about jail that appeals to the Governor. That's the second, if not the third time he's volunteered to go to jail - remember the Governor of Nevada's threat to send Tanapag's PCB's back to Saipan when the governor said he'd go to jail before he let that happen.?)</I>

By now, there has been so much grand-standing that letting the truth come out - whatever it is - is bound to embarrass someone. Which could mean that whoever knows it, isn't willing to tell it. What a sad state of affairs that is!

Almost more disturbing than the lack of plain simple truth is the state of disarray into which the government has now fallen. Gone is the sense of dedication, of common interests, of cooperation and harmony among House, Senate and Administration that had seemed to exist heretofore. Gone are the pledges that together, the various components of government would find ways to cope, would work to solve the problems, would support each other in fulfilling their functions.

Now we have the Senate not only working against the House, but also passing unconstitutional measures, such as the bill authorizing the limits of deficit spending - which is unconstitutional per se - but since it constitutes an appropriation, is unconstitutional on other grounds as well, as only the House is authorized to initiate appropriations.

Now the former House Speaker is accusing the present House Speaker of "reneging" on promises, of lying, instead of consulting with him, as had been the pattern just a few weeks ago. Though at least he hasn't stopped talking to House members altogether.

And the Secretary of Finance seemingly countering the position of the administration by saying that the government isn't out of money and could meet payroll when the administration is saying quite the opposite.

Front-page coverage in the newspapers isn't helping matters any. There isn't any clarification, only conflicting accounts by one source or another to muddle things further.

Wonder if it isn't time to call in a mediator? In mediation, as one proponent has said, there's no right or wrong, no good guy or bad guy, there's only a problem in need of resolution. Even that may not bring truth, but at least it would bring an end to the rash accusations and empty threats (medical referral and scholarship payments have not, in fact, ceased) and false bravados.

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It would be nice to know on what basis the administration drew up those Draconian measures it has proposed for coping with the shortage of funds. There doesn't seem to be much rhyme or reason there. Surely funding needs over the next six weeks aren't so large as to require total impoundment of all government monies? To require turning off all street lights, all air conditioning, canceling all overtime? Aren't we exaggerating just a little here?

A more judicious use of those impounded funds, of air conditioning, of street lights, of overtime, of travel, is long overdue, and would cut costs considerably. But to halt all operations altogether? Even proposing such extremes invites disbelief.

There is too the apparent failure by government to "draw down" federal grant funds available to the CNMI for money it has expended but for which it is entitled to reimbursement. According to the coconut wireless, the drawdowns occur only quarterly if that, when in fact they are available and could be drawn down on a monthly, weekly, or even daily basis if desired, which would add considerably to available resources.....

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Abolishing Saipan's municipal council - if not those of Rota and Tinian as well - is another potential source of additional revenue. Saipan's council has a reputation of being good only for the generation of resolutions - and photo opportunities. Granted, it would take a constitutional amendment to abolish the council, but doing so should, nevertheless, be high on any plan for reducing expenditures - especially needless ones. Sad to say, the subject has not been brought up by anyone. Probably because the councils are composed of former politicians, and no one wants to deprive the council members of even their watered-down claim to public notice and government pay.

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While - at least theoretically - one might be able to get rid of the municipal council, getting rid of prostitution is a question of quite another ilk. It might be possible to get rid of it in certain areas, but to get rid of it all together? Like cockroaches, the practice of prostitution seems unexterminatable. But contrary to opinions in some quarters, it is not uncontrollable. Poker parlors aren't desirable either, but one can get a business license to run one. That opens the way to tax the business - generating government revenue. And once prostitution was licensed, health inspections could be imposed, making the hazard of sexually transmitted disease considerably less than it is now.

Those who claim that it cannot be gotten rid of, but that neither can they control it, are looking at it with too narrow a mind-set. It can - and should - be taken out of the mainstream. It can - and should - be regulated. It can - and should - be controlled. All it needs is the courage and determination to do so.

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How interesting that it has taken an "outsider" to raise issues about the sale of Verizon that have not been brought up heretofore. David Hughes - once editor of the <I>Variety</I> and now residing in Herndon, Virginia - in a letter to the editor of that paper on Wednesday cautioned that the CNMI should not accept promises of increased access to internet through satellite connections from Verizon's successor, but should insist on wired oceanic cable. Moreover, he states that it should be possible to connect Rota, Tinian and Saipan through a wireless system that would take only months to install, and would be far cheaper than what has been proposed. He also makes some excellent suggestions regarding technical support requirements and criteria for awarding tax credits.

Thanks, Dave!

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Someone owes the rest of us some major explanations. Several weeks ago the <I>Variety</I> carried, on its front page, in bright yellow, lists of contaminants found in garment factory wells on island. The report did not give any information as to how the levels reported related to accepted EPA standards. The implication was that all of the contaminants exceeded EPA limits, and that the garment factories were at fault.

Also last month, the Commonwealth Utility Commission issued a "Water Quality Consumer Confidence Report." It showed the level of contaminants as compared to EPA standards in ten water regions on Saipan as well as in designated water regions on Tinian and Rota. It found that of 91 regulated contaminants, none found in the Saipan water system exceeded EPA standards.

The data in the CUC report was given in parts per million or parts per billion (ppm or ppb). The data in the <I>Variety</I> was reported in micrograms per liter, or ug/l. There is therefore no way to compare the two reports, no way of telling whether the garment factory water systems violate EPA standards or not. The two reports would seem to contradict each other, leaving unanswered the scary question of whether our groundwater is contaminated, if so, how much, where and with what.

Where does truth lie? And what is the truth? Who will shed light on the confusion?

