

On My Mind
10/07/05

Though the just-announced payout of long overdue COLA to retirees is only going to bring me between \$7 and \$8 per payday, the retroactive lump sum of payments for this past year will, nevertheless, be welcome. Yet I can't help but feel that the release of the COLA payments at this point in time is not being done because it is the right thing to do, but because the election is next month and it will be one more "proof" the governor can claim to try show he is serving the people.</P>

And in any case, COLA is only being promised for the rest of the calendar year. After December, further COLA payments will again depend on an appropriation from the legislature.</P>

It would be interesting to know where the money came from. Is it FY 2005 money that has been taken from another account? Or is it newly available FY 2006 money? Or?</P>

Can't help wondering, as well, who it is that, according to an article in the Tribune, is getting \$162,000 per year as a retirement benefit. Isn't it about 99% of CNMI residents that don't earn that much in salary, much less as retirement?</P>

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And speaking of the governor and elections - and campaigning - I find the brouhaha over the Covenant Party's controversial ad which transposed the governor's head on the body of the Philippine Consul both typical of local politics - and at the same time, vastly over-blown.</P>

The super-imposition was so subtle that someone had to point it out to me - I would not have "caught on" otherwise. If the Covenant Party had wanted to make a point, it should have made the super-imposition more obvious - like a caricature. That way, everyone would have caught on, and the party would be less guilty of wrong-doing - since caricature is a common type of political commentary. That they did not do so makes the party appear sleazy, dishonest, unscrupulous.</P>

However, now that it has been "outed" so to speak, I think the fuss the governor and his party are making is out of proportion. It would have been quite enough if the governor had issued a statement - which he hasn't, strangely enough - that he had never appeared with or shaken hands with Sedy Demese while wearing a barong tagalog, and let it go at that. The people could have figured the rest out by themselves. But then, name-calling is such a part of politics here.....</P>

As for Sedy Demese's protestations that her pro-Babauta publications are not politically motivated, as one observer noted, they are "a lot "friendlier" to Babauta than any other publication[s] on the island." Need more be said?</P>

That the deceptive picture appeared in the Tribune and not the Variety is only an issue, it seems to me, in that it reflects the jealousy of the Variety for not having gotten the ad as well. One would have thought that with its evident

anti-Babauta stance, the Variety would have been the logical place to run the ad.</P>

Surely there are more important issues for the media - and the principals involved - to spend time, money and effort on?</P>

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A trivia comment on the campaign: There have been two pocket meetings within earshot of my place this past week. As I recall from previous years, they usually run quite late, and are punctuated by supporters blowing their car horns when telling points are made. The two this week both ended early, and I heard no horns being blown. One I know was a Democratic function - the other I am not so sure of. I heard the Republican Party and the governor mentioned but could not tell whether the mention was positive or negative.</P>

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Not so trivial is the apparent cover-up involving the fishermen suspected of fishing in a designated reserve. Seven men in a boat were spotted by conservation officers at Bird Island, and a boat with seven fishermen was later accosted where they docked. Yet the head of the Department of Lands and Natural Resources has said, in consultation with the office of the Attorney General, that there was not enough evidence to bring charges against the seven fishermen.</P>

Among the statements made by the fishermen, according to the story in the Variety, was that it was too dark to see where they were, whether they were in or near the reserve. Yet it could not have been all that dark, since they did find their way there, and the conservation officers were able to observe them, presumably without shining spotlights on them.</P>

While it is true that the boat was not actually followed from the reserve to the dock, how many other boats went out that night with seven fishermen aboard? That might be "circumstantial" evidence, but it would appear pretty persuasive.</P>

It seems unbelievable that over the four hours that the fishermen were allegedly observed, not one of the conservation officers could make out enough details of the boat, its equipment or distinguishing features to confirm its identity when it landed. If this is the case, clearly the conservation officers need more training. If it is not the case, the accusation of "cover-up" seems more than justified.</P>

With near-shore fish stock much depleted over the years, and attempts to restore the stock only recently having begun, the last thing Saipan - and the CNMI as a whole - needs is the message that there is no punishment for violating conservation areas. Even the crew's equipment and catch were given back to them, according to the Division of Fish and Wildlife.</P>

Rumor has it that a candidate for office was involved, and that is why charges were dropped. Whatever the reason, pretty disheartening.</P>

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Can one defend such behavior (letting politics sway law enforcement) as being part of the culture? As an example of the tension said to exist between local culture and the law? A

Humanities Council-sponsored round-table discussion held earlier this week talked about culture and the law, but this question did not come up. It would have been interesting to hear what the participants - an assortment of representatives from the legal, education, history, sociological and cultural communities, would have said.</P>

The session was one of three sponsored or co-sponsored by the Humanities Council and held at the auditorium in the Visitors Center at American Memorial Park over the last two weeks, and was by far the most thought-provoking. It's a pity it wasn't recorded. Hottest topic raised was whether jury trials were appropriate to the CNMI, with one panelist saying they should be abolished since they only produce outcomes that flout the law, and others saying jury trials are a fundamental right. In my humble opinion, which there was not time for me to air that night, jury trials are a Western institution, not a Pacific, or Asian, or Eastern one, so may not be as fundamental to the local culture.</P>

Which is not to say that the other two events at the Center were not interesting in their own right.

Howard Willens, noted co-author (with his wife Deanne Siemer) of two books on the formation of the CNMI and its Covenant, spoke on visits he and Siemer had made to the presidential libraries of John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon as part of a project, sponsored in part by the Humanities Council, to identify, copy and make available, documents relevant to the CNMI found in ten presidential libraries.</P>

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Not so trivial, either, was the story carried in the Variety this past week that the governor had opened a personal savings account at the Bank of Saipan. Supposedly, the point was "to focus attention on re-building the bank." But the example set - that's it's ok to put money into a bank that is not federally insured - is a very bad one indeed. Several government agencies are still suffering from the consequences of doing that - the Retirement Fund, for example, still cannot access the more than \$5 million it once deposited in the BoS, the Commonwealth Development Authority cannot access the more than \$1 million it once deposited, and neither can the Marianas Public Land Authority access its more than \$8 million in BoS.</P>

What's worse, under a proposed plan to end the receivership, those depositors would not be fully repaid for up to 24 years, and in the meantime, their deposits would earn only 1% interest. Is that the kind of bank the governor thinks people should give their money to?</P>

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Short takes:

- I've been told that providing a weekly tally of movie ratings won't make a difference to what gets shown at the local movie house - the films are selected off-island, and are chosen in part by the movie maker, who gets to decide where he or she thinks showing the film will draw enough of an audience to make a profit. But I intend to do so anyway, in hopes that it might inspire someone to open a counter-theater, maybe eventually provide enough ammunition to get the higher-ups to change their mind. This week: 1 "R," 4 "PG-13's," 1 "PG" and - would you believe it, 1 "G." Of course the "G" is such a slapstick comedy it can hardly be said to have merit.</P>

- In last week's column, I asked that someone let me know how to contact those involved with the

Forensic League, so that I might volunteer my services. I've had no response. Not sure whether that means that Forensic League aficionados do not read my column, or whether they are not interested in making use of my services.</P>

- Left out of the list of kudos last week was one to Bestseller book store in Susupe, which had set up, the previous week, a dramatic display of banned books. Unfortunately, the display has since been dismantled - it was up only for the week of the American Library Association observation of Banned Books Week. Now if Bestseller would only improve its collection of locally relevant materials!</P>