

On My Mind
12/29/06

With kind thoughts and good intentions on many peoples' minds at this time of year, maybe it's the right time to talk about what people can do for themselves and each other independently of government subsidy, control, and intervention. Two recent examples of just how well this works, how effective it can be, are the Beautify CNMI! movement - which took off with a sort of spontaneous combustion and shows no sign of abating any time soon, having already accomplished an impressive string of achievements, and Bud White's Teacher of the Year fund raising.

Both endeavors met a perceived need. Neither involved formal government control, funding, or financial support (though of course, Beautify CNMI! does meet on government time, in government facilities). And both have established on-going programs that show every sign of being successful long into the future.

A third such endeavor is struggling to join the ranksthe Rotary Club's effort to establish a venue for skate-boarders. Meetings are being held, funds solicited, plans made - and most recently, free design services offered by a stateside firm, provided people here thought it could be hired to do the actual work. Having already raised \$30,000, the group hopes to raise another \$100,000 to get the rink built. While one congressman has said he will try to obtain government funding, to date the project has confined itself to working in the private sector.

This past week, yet a fourth project has emergedthe new ad hoc group formed for the purpose of "sprucing up or transforming the appearance of the [entire] downtown Garapan tourist area," to use the words of *Saipan Tribune* reporter Liberty Dones. Taking the lead will be Century Insurance president David M. Sablan and Hyatt Regency Saipan general manager Michael von Siebenthal. Their intent is to meet with every business operator in the area, and discuss everything from over-all safety, anchoring of loose objects and planting of decorative trees and flowers to compliance with CNMI's building safety code.

Twenty teams have been established, and the entire area broken down into 20 blocks, each assigned to one of the teams. Team captains will be expected to report monthly, with the effort projected to be completed by June 2007. According to both local papers, more volunteers are needed - but neither provided information as to whom to contact.

Wonder if this effort is related in any way to the recent announcement by the zoning board that it does not intend to rid Garapan's Paseo area of "adult businesses"?

I wonder, too, whether such an approach wouldn't have a better chance of success in developing and implementing a Commonwealth Comprehensive Infrastructure Plan as called for by House Bill 15-87 than the un-wieldy eighteen-member task force the bill proposes. Every conceivably related government division, office, agency - as well as a few non-government ones - is included in the list of members; ten members would constitute a quorum. It's an excellent idea - the intent being to better coordinate the development, construction and maintenance of the

Commonwealth's infrastructure - i.e., its roads and highways, airports, seaports, power, water, sewer, telephone services, and radio and television broadcasts. But the idea's execution as proposed in this bill is pretty unworkable. All of those offices and agencies are already involved in innumerable other task forces, committees, boards. Adding one more will only serve to detract from the performance of each one's primary function.

Nor does it seem necessary, given the examples cited above, to set up a formal structure - which will no doubt incur costs of secretary, equipment, facilities - when a smaller group might do the work more easily and effectively. An ad hoc committee could be formed (perhaps at the call of the governor?), and the work of identifying existing plans and trying to interweave them parcelled out to various sub-committees, or teams, as appropriate.

The question, of course, is whether a strategy that works in the private sector can also work in the public sector. But as someone once said, 'if you don't swing [the bat], you won't hit [the ball].'

Going global for a moment, a fundamental problem in trying to resolve the Iraq crisis is that those seeking solutions have no understanding of the "reality on the ground." They come with good intentions to create "a centralized, broad-based, multi-ethnic government committed to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law." They come from "postmodern, secular, globalized states with liberal traditions in law and government" for whom it is natural to initiate projects on "urban design, women's rights and fiber-optic cable networks, to talk about transparent, clean, and accountable processes, tolerance and civil society, and to speak of a people 'who desire peace at any cost and understand the need for a centralized, multi-ethnic government.'"

The words are those of Rory Stewart, a Scottish teacher of history who walked across Afghanistan six weeks after the Taliban had fallen, having already spent sixteen months walking twenty to twenty-five miles a day across Iran, Pakistan, India and Nepal. An accomplished linguist, he shared food and accommodations with villagers he encountered along the way, sometimes protected and sometimes not by letters of introduction from village chiefs or other government officials with mind-numbing names from sects and clans with equally unusual names.

Writes Stewart, in his book "The Places Inbetween," such do-gooders do not understand the thought process of Seyyed Kerbalahi's wife, who had not moved five kilometers from her home in forty years, or Dr. Habibulla, the vet, who carried an automatic weapon in the way they carried briefcases. "The villagers I had met were mostly illiterate, lived far from electricity or television, and knew very little about the outside world. Versions of Islam; views of ethnicity, government, politics, and the proper methods of dispute resolution (including armed conflict) and the experience of twenty-five years of war differed from region to region."

One village understood political power in terms of its feudal lord. Another wanted a social order based on Iranian political Islam. Another hated the idea of centralized government because it associated it with suffering under the Taliban. "The differences between groups were deep, elusive and difficult to overcome. Village democracy, gender issues, and centralization would be hard-to-sell concepts in some

areas."

It doesn't take much imagination to conclude that the same is probably equally true of the different parts of Iraq, and to realize that the lofty goals of the U.S., the UN, the Iraq Study Group and all the experts inbetween are just as inappropriate as Stewart found those working in Afghanistan.

If understanding, appropriate aid, a workable solution are ever to materialize, it's hard to see how, unless Stewart's book is made required reading for all involved, from military leaders, policy makers and donor companies and countries to the individuals on the ground in Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Lebanon, Afghanistan....

Short takes

There's been a misconception about the \$5,000 Teacher of the Year award, and though it seems to me it would have been more appropriate for the Public School System to make the correction, no one there has publicly done so, so herewith PSS never gave the Teacher of the Year more than \$1,000. The "bonus" \$4,000 was added under the Babauta administration. So it is not PSS that shorted the Teacher of the Year, but this administration, which chose not to continue the precedent set by the previous one. Even though funds are tight, it seems pretty miserly to have refused to similarly honor this year's Teacher of the Year. If the hope of tomorrow is today's children, then certainly their teachers deserve such recognition and rewards.

*

Miserable though times are at the moment, some unintended consequences are emerging that may prove of permanent benefit. The high cost of power, for example, is forcing everyone to look at ways of conserving electricity. It's long been known that the most effective way to reduce power consumption is through conservation, and while it is not easy to persuade people that this is so, in the CNMI, the increase in utility costs has been a great incentive. It may even come to affect construction styles, as people realize the advantage of cross-breezes, peaked roofs, and reflective paint, and to affect life-styles, as people buy smaller cars, more energy-efficient lights and appliances.

And with government not able to support and subsidize community action-type projects, people are beginning to take the initiative themselves - to become involved, to assume some responsibility, to join together for the common good. I'm sure that's not what Ben and Tim had in mind when they promised "better times" - nor should they take credit for such beneficial unintended consequences, but the rest of the people can justifiably take pride in being part of the solution, not the problem.

*

Saipan Ice and Water is offering a new service - the addition of fluoride to the drinking water it sells. There is some controversy regarding the benefits of fluoridated drinking water - check it out on the web. But for people who believe it does help prevent cavities and other dental problems - especially among children - and people who either eat too much sugar or don't practice good dental hygiene, at least now there's the option of drinking fluoridated water. It's available from Saipan Ice for only an additional \$.25 per five gallon container.

*

Those who protest that fireworks are safe if they are properly used are missing an important point. Fireworks are objectionable not only because they might cause

injury but also because the noisy ones disturb the peace. A tropical island is supposed to be tranquil. Moreover, so is the holiday season, deeply religious for a large number of island residents. Ear-shattering explosions at random intervals morning, noon and night all over the island do not constitute tranquillity. Both tourists and residents deserve better.

*

New movies: none. Does that mean Saipan won't get to see "Pursuit of Happyness" or "Children of Men," both rated higher on the charts than either "Eragon" or "The Holiday," now showing?