Hana Hou!

Hana hou means “one more time,” “do it again,” or “encore!” You’ll often hear it at concerts, hula performances, or almost anywhere in Hawaii when an audience is calling for one more song or dance. It is even used in the workplace when a team leader is urging his or her colleagues to try again or to repeat a task, whether pleasant or unpleasant.

Regrettably, hana hou is also what has been coming out of Washington, D.C., this past week—repeated cheap shots at the Travel & Tourism industry, which is struggling mightily to stay afloat in these tough economic times.

It started earlier this month when, during a televised town hall meeting in Indiana, President Obama said that companies receiving taxpayer money shouldn’t use corporate jets or “take trips to Las Vegas or the Super Bowl.”

As reported in last week’s Saturday Briefing, that greatly troubled the Travel & Tourism industry and led to the cancellation of a number of corporate meetings here in Hawaii, Las Vegas, and elsewhere. Jobs at all levels were lost, and recovery will be long and difficult.

This week, President Obama repeated his performance when, in his speech to a joint session of Congress viewed by over 52 million on TV, he said, “This time, CEOs won’t be able to use taxpayer money to pad their paychecks or buy fancy drapes or disappear on a private jet. Those days are over.”

The President conveniently neglected to mention his recent Air Force One flight to Denver to sign the Stimulus Bill, which could just as easily have been signed in the White House Rose Garden, leaving no carbon footprint and saving approximately 15,000 gallons of fuel (about 5 gallons per mile for a 747, according to the Boeing website, for the 3,000-mile round trip) – enough to drive a 30-mpg car 450,000 miles, or nearly twice the distance to the moon!

Senator John Kerry (D-MA) piled on by chastising Northern Trust Corp., which in November received about $1.5 billion under the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP). Northern recently sponsored a golf tournament in California. As part of the sponsorship, the bank wined and dined many clients and employees at deluxe properties, including a Ritz-Carlton and the Beverly Wilshire in the Los Angeles area.

Kerry issued a press release saying he would introduce the TARP Taxpayer Protection and Corporate Responsibility Act that “would prevent any recipient of TARP funds from hosting, sponsoring, or paying for conferences, holiday parties, and entertainment events.” Penalties would include fines and forced restitution of TARP funds. According to The Wall Street Journal, these penalties could be avoided if the company received a waiver from the U.S. Treasury Secretary, who would have “30 days to issue his golf and chardonnay diktat.”

There go an awful lot of company Christmas parties!

House Financial Services Committee Chair Barney Frank (D-MA), along with 17 Democrats on his committee, followed up with a letter to Northern Trust’s CEO asking that the bank repay what it “frittered away on these lavish events” during the golf tournament.

Yes, that’s the same Barney Frank who received more than $40,000 in campaign donations from Fannie Mae since 1989 and was once romantically involved with a Fannie Mae executive. And, it’s the same Barney Frank who said five years ago, “These two entities – Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac – are not facing any kind of financial crisis. The more people exaggerate these problems, the more pressure there is on these companies, the less we will see in terms of affordable housing.”

Northern Trust CEO Frederick Waddell defended the Los Angeles event, pointing out that it was part of a long-term commitment to sponsor the golf tournament and an appropriate way to show appreciation to its clients. He added that no TARP funds were used for the event and that TARP money Northern received had instead been used to support high-quality loan growth of 21 percent in 2008, which would, in turn, help our nation recover from the current financial crisis.

Unfortunately, in this atmosphere, corporate meeting planners and executives are running for cover. Meetings, conventions, and incentive trips already on the books are being cancelled, and few people are making plans for events like these in 2010 or the following years.

U.S. Travel Association CEO Roger Dow said, “We are perilously close to falling into a witch-hunt mentality in which working Americans are being unfairly punished. For every case of wasteful spending, we are seeing scores of instances in which the game of ‘gotcha’ has forced businesses to cancel legitimate activities that would have grown their bottom lines and generated jobs and economic growth for their local communities.”

I know what Dow means when he is talking about “working Americans.” It is the wide range of dedicated people who make Travel & Tourism flourish and grow, such as housekeepers, wait help, bellmen, taxi drivers, vegetable farmers, store clerks, entertainers . . . and in Hawaii, you can add hula dancers and lei sellers.
Everyone is suffering right now, and the future looks bleak.

What will we in Travel & Tourism get from Washington next week? Will it be encouragement, support, or perhaps even a promotional film with Barack Obama personally inviting overseas travelers to come to America for a visit?

Or, will it be more of the same? Hana Hou!

References:
1 - www.businessandmedia.org/articles/2008/20080924145932.aspx