



UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY
WASHINGTON 25, D. C.

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Dear Mr. Sisco:

Thank you for providing us with copies of your study concerning the future of the territories and the Trust Territory and your proposed National Security Action Memorandum, both of which accompanied your letter to me of September 15. I am glad to comment upon both. I note that these papers were prompted at least in part by the Navy Point Paper of November 1964 and the memorandum of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of February 1965. I therefore enclose for your information a copy of a memorandum from the Director of the Office of Territories to me, dated February 10, 1965, which responds to the Navy Point Paper, and a copy of a letter from the Deputy Assistant Secretary of this Department to the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, dated March 5, 1965, which responds to the memorandum from the Joint Chiefs.

The purpose of the study which you transmitted is to outline a program "to remove the non-self-governing label" from the territories and the Trust Territory, so as to terminate the international obligations of the United States relative to their administration". This action is sought on the basis of what appear to be four premises:

- (1) The United States has been and will increasingly be embarrassed internationally by the existence of its three territories and the Trust Territory.
- (2) Insular areas are of great importance now, and are likely to be of increasing importance, for military purposes.
- (3) The people of the territories now yearn for a greater measure of self-government.
- (4) There are "pressures within the American territories for a new status" and there is within the territories a desire to clarify "their relationship with the United States".

We would concede, largely, premises (1) and (2). The expert judgment of the pertinent departments clearly supports them. But I must observe, with respect to (2), that I do not believe it has been demonstrated that the current status of these areas detracts from their military usefulness.

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As to (3), there is indeed, in both the Virgin Islands and Guam, a real, almost urgent, desire for further self-government. We share this desire and are doing something about it, by means of legislation to permit elected governors, non-voting delegates in the Congress, and national voting privileges for citizen residents of the territories. We cannot be sanguine concerning the prospects for early enactment of this legislation, but we shall press for it and we should welcome the support of the other interested departments. So far as Samoa and the Trust Territory are concerned, we are genuinely unaware that the people of those areas have any current, unfulfilled self-government aspirations. They are, of course, in political transition; but at a pace which is quite agreeable to them.

As to (4), in our judgment this is untrue. The nature of the relationship between the four areas in question and the United States is both simple and clear to all who seek to understand it. Barring the Marianas' desire to merge with Guam, there is no evidence to support the assertion that the people of the areas desire at this time any change in their basic relationship to the United States.

In light of these premises, the study urges two principal courses of action: (1) The "early exercise of the right of self-determination through separate plebiscites" in each of the four areas, and (2) the placing of "action responsibility" for the plebiscites and their implementation in the White House.

I would turn, first, to a possible plebiscite in each of the three non-self-governing territories (and I would observe in passing that plebiscites, contrary to the observation on page 5 of the study, have been an essential ingredient in the procedure looking toward the current status of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Alaska, and Hawaii). In our judgment, a plebiscite would be subject to at least the following considerations and objections:

(a) Unless the result of the plebiscite is instantly implemented, we believe it would serve no useful purpose internationally or domestically. Absent instant implementation, territorial voters could be expected to develop disenchantment with the United States. Our foreign critics would have a real basis for criticism. And we could expect such critics to disregard the results of a plebiscite, as being obsolete, within a few months.

(b) Instant implementation could be insured by only one means, a prior Act of Congress outlining the consequences that would necessarily flow from any of the choices offered. We frankly cannot conceive of a

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Congressional willingness to state (nor of an Executive Branch willingness to urge that it do so), that if the people of Guam want independence, they may have it; or that if the Virgin Islanders want to become a part of a State, they may do so. Yet we would agree with the portions of the study which make clear that sovereign independence and integration should be among the options offered. We do not believe that either would be chosen at this time, although we would hope that political integration would be the ultimate choice, in due course, of the territorial populations.

(c) Even if the results of the plebiscite were instantly implemented, and assuming that a "free association" status were selected (which we think so likely as to be almost inevitable), the United States might still find itself haunted by the territories for years to come. Regardless of the firmness and the correctness with which we may hold to the view that Puerto Rico ceased to be non-self-governing in 1953, it remains something of a problem internationally.

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Accordingly, we do not believe that action should be taken looking toward the holding of plebiscites at any early date in any of the three territories.

The situation with respect to the Trust Territory is, however, quite different. We know that a plebiscite must be held in that area, (although we do not read NSAM 268, as the study states, as requiring that a date be set). Moreover, we are confident that a plebiscite would result in a vote overwhelmingly opposed to sovereign independence. So far as this Department is concerned, a plebiscite could be held in the Trust Territory tomorrow, or at any time in the foreseeable future, with every reasonable assurance of a substantial majority in favor of continued association with the United States.

Although we would foresee from such vote that the Trust Territory would become, in the Navy's words, an "incontrovertible part of the United States", we would not foresee that it would remove the Trust Territory from international scrutiny. We would instead expect that the Trust Territory would become a non-self-governing territory under Article 73 of the charter. This is so because we in this Department would be unable and unwilling at this time to offer to the Trust Territory a "free association" option which would result in a political status more elevated than that which Guam or the Virgin Islands now occupy. We also believe that the Congress would be unwilling at this time to do so. We would thus foresee that a plebiscite in the Trust Territory would offer the three options of sovereign independence, continuation of the current trusteeship status, and association with the United States as an unincorporated territory. If a plebiscite so based would

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serve a useful purpose, and with the assurance we feel we can give that the third such option would be overwhelmingly chosen, we would be glad to cooperate in the steps leading to it.

As our enclosed letter to the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense states, there appear to be two prerequisites before a plebiscite is held in the Trust Territory. One is peculiarly yours -- to obtain UN sanction and presumably supervision for the vote, plus such assurances as you may find necessary that the result would be a termination of trusteeship status. The second is largely ours, but we would require your aid and that of the Defense Department -- to obtain Congressional assurances that it will in turn take action to accommodate the islands of Micronesia in the American political framework. We believe that we can achieve the second of these prerequisites and will be glad to begin to do so, when we have your assurance that it is timely. We shall await your guidance.

The second principal recommendation of the study is that action responsibility for the plebiscites and their implementation be placed in the White House. This course is recommended to "avoid the fate" of the Trust Territory Task Force. We are unclear as to what this means precisely, inasmuch as the Task Force was abolished following submission of its report, and its report has been implemented in those major particulars in which it was desirable and feasible to do so. In any event, we would welcome guidance and assistance from the White House on the matter of the status of the territories and the Trust Territory and would interpose no objection to any effort to bring this to pass.

We will be very happy at any time to meet with you or to correspond with you further concerning any matter touched upon in this letter.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Assistant Secretary of Defense McNaughton.

Sincerely yours,

Under *John A. Comar*
Secretary of the Interior

Honorable Joseph J. Sisco
Assistant Secretary of State
Department of State
Washington, D. C.

Enclosures

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