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WHO
OWNS
AMERICA?

by

Walter J. Hickel

PRENTICE-HALL, INC.
Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey

Who Owns America?

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ISBN 0-13-958322-X

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 75-171214

Printed in the United States of America *T*

Prentice-Hall International, Inc., London

Prentice-Hall of Australia, Pty. Ltd., Sydney

Prentice-Hall of Canada, Ltd., Toronto

Prentice-Hall of India Private Ltd., New Delhi

Prentice-Hall of Japan, Inc., Tokyo

the weeks and months went by, I would meet often on various budgetary and fiscal matters with other members of the Cabinet: Secretary Kennedy of the Treasury, Secretary Maurice Stans of Commerce, Secretary Romney of HUD and Secretary George Shultz of Labor. When we worked on the budget, I strongly expressed my thoughts to Robert Mayo, director of the Bureau of the Budget.

I never got to first base. At one meeting, Postmaster General Winton ("Red") Blount said: "Wally, if we're going to talk about that interest thing again, you've got to understand that we can't save the world. Let's not waste any more time on that."

I turned to Paul McCracken, chairman of the President's Council of Economic Advisors. "Paul, sometime I'd really like to talk to you about this problem. We're going to increase inflation, not ease it, if we keep raising interest."

He nodded, but that was that. We never did have that talk.

2. *Mission for the President*

The morning of May 1, 1969, was a spring morning at its best in Washington. The grass sparkled with dew and the world looked fresh and clean. As I walked out of the home I had recently bought in the Maryland suburb of Kenwood, I felt good. We had moved into the house less than a week earlier after living for nearly four months in an apartment at the Sheraton-Park Hotel, two floors below Vice President Spiro Agnew's apartment.

I stepped into my limousine and my driver, Hilton Coleman, began the thirty-minute run to Andrews Air Force Base, where I boarded an Air Force jet. By 8:15 A.M. we were rolling down the runway headed west to the Pacific—bound on a special mission for the President.

I had received President Nixon's approval for a trip I con-

sidered of considerable importance to the nation: a 14,000-mile fact-finding mission to Micronesia, the Trust Territory of the Western Pacific, for which the Department of the Interior has administrative responsibility.

Ermalee went with me. Our party also included Mrs. Elizabeth R. Farrington, director of Interior's Office of Territories; Edward E. Johnston, whom the President had nominated the previous month to be the new High Commissioner of the Trust Territory; and members of my staff and the press.

The purpose of my trip was to assess for the Administration the needs and desires of the native peoples of Micronesia regarding their future political and economic development. What form of government did the Micronesians want? Who owned these 2,100 islands, anyway? The Trust Territory, wrested from the Japanese during World War II, had been administered by the United States since 1947 under an agreement that required our government to report at least once a year to the United Nations Security Council.

The direct, nonmilitary administration of the Trust was carried out by a civilian High Commissioner under the Office of Territories, but the agreement with the United Nations resembled in one important detail the League of Nations mandate given the Japanese over the same islands following World War I. The Japanese had full authority over the islands, and they used that authority between World Wars to build military installations like the huge naval base at Truk, which cost America much blood in the 1940's. Now the United States had the same full authority, including the right to establish military bases. What would we do with that authority?

The story behind my trip started in the middle of February, less than a month after I became Secretary of the Interior. My staff brought to my attention a report that the United States was likely to be seriously criticized during the next session of the United Nations General Assembly for mishan-

dling its responsibilities in the Trust Territory. I directed that all available information be summarized for a presentation to me. The information on the Trust Territory indicated that we had been lax in caring for the needs of the people of the Territory. The report showed desperate needs for better education and health facilities and—most important—for some mechanism allowing the voice of the Micronesians themselves to be heard in the decision-making that affected them.

I assigned a number of my staff members the responsibility of preparing recommendations we might make to Congress for improving conditions for the Micronesians. I also dispatched members of my staff to Saipan and throughout the Territory to meet with its leaders to get their assessments of some of their more basic problems.

As the matter developed, I became more and more convinced that there was a need for me to visit Micronesia personally and determine first-hand what could be done to help these people.

The President agreed.

Twelve hours after we lifted off from Andrews, our aircraft began letting down over Honolulu's Hickam Field, where we were to spend the first night of our tour.¹ I told Dick Prouty of the *Denver Post* and Reginald Bragonier of *Life*: "There are 90,000 people who've been ignored too damned long. I have lived in a Territory much of my life under the heavy hand of federal government. I know its strengths and I know

¹ This was Aircraft 24129, nicknamed by the Air Force "the McNamara tube." A C-135—the military version of the Boeing 707—the plane had been converted from a freighter into a long-range executive aircraft at the direction of President Kennedy's Defense Secretary Robert McNamara. The passenger compartment of "the Tube" had no windows, which proved disconcerting at first.

its weaknesses, and I think I can be of help in Micronesia."

Mine was the first trip to the Trust Territory taken by a Secretary of the Interior in seven years. As we visited some of the major islands—Saipan, Truk, Tinian—I was impressed by the cordial personal welcome extended to us by these warm and outgoing people.² I was particularly taken by their beautiful and friendly children, and I loved every minute I spent with them. Harking back to my earlier experiences in Alaska, I tried, throughout my trip, to stress that Micronesians needed and deserved a much louder voice in their own affairs. And I exhorted them to "dream big dreams."

On Monday, May 5, I stood on the outdoor stage of a mission school and spoke to the people of Saipan who had gathered before me, plus thousands of others throughout the islands who were listening to the Micronesian Broadcasting System: "You will help develop the legislation which will end the trusteeship and build a lasting political partnership with us." I pledged immediate steps to improve the Micronesian judicial system, ease tariff barriers and travel restrictions, gear up for major educational and health programs and invite new investment capital to the islands: "For years you have had little voice in your government. This is wrong. Only when the people lead their government can that government be great and people prosper. And while that work goes forward, land will not be taken from Micronesians for any government purpose without full consultation with all parties involved and full and adequate compensation to land owners."

"Full compensation" was an extremely important point, one that would put me in conflict with some of the White

² Hardly anything remains today on Tinian—site of the flights of the B-29 bombers *Enola Gay* and *Bock's Car*, which in 1945 dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki—other than hundreds of thousands of square yards of concrete runways. On Saipan, the other major island in the Trust Territory, one need push only a few feet into the jungle to find rusting Japanese artillery.

House people later, especially Dr. Henry Kissinger, assistant to the President on national security affairs. But we left Saipan that night and headed for home with a feeling of pride and accomplishment. We had made *contact*. We had established rapport. The people of the Trust Territory and I understood each other. It was a human thing. I tried to symbolize this rapport by swearing in High Commissioner Ed Johnston in Saipan, the seat of the territorial government, rather than in Washington, D.C., 6,778 miles away, where the ceremony had always taken place before.

I believed then, and I believe now, that the people of the Trust Territory had the right to own and dispose of their own land with full agreement and compensation. If I now ask "Who Owns America?" then the Micronesians have every right to ask "Who Owns Micronesia?"³

3. 'Hickel's Disease'

We must understand that we have the greatest political system ever put together on this earth. That system fits attitudes in the United States which have been imported from Europe. Our ethnic roots extend primarily back to Europe, and this has influenced the entire fabric of our social, political, academic and judicial thinking. Our Founding Fathers were naturally oriented to the way of life they had brought from Europe. They started the American Revolution as freemen claiming only the natural rights of Englishmen. But this does not mean that our systems, and all our attitudes, will work when applied to our other doorstep: the Pacific Ocean, gateway to two-thirds of the population of this earth.

In Micronesia, the overriding desire and need of the people

³ As this book is written, the political situation in Micronesia remains unresolved and deteriorating.

is to own their own land. That is all they have. But Henry Kissinger argued that the United States had to have the right of eminent domain—the right to condemn what Micronesian land we wished; to build what bases and other facilities we wished, with little regard for the moral (if not legal) rights of the people who inhabited this land.

We had this argument out at a meeting that took place in Secretary of State William Rogers's office. Along with Rogers, Kissinger and myself, Harrison Loesch and Mitch Melich were there. I might have gone along with almost anything less than the argument for eminent domain—such as negotiated purchase or lease of land. We had established military bases in Turkey and Spain without right of eminent domain. What right did we have to invoke eminent domain on the Micronesians? They had little enough land for their own needs, and their very livelihood depended on that land and the surrounding ocean. They wanted to work with us. They told me in Saipan that all they wanted was a voice in our decisions.

But Kissinger's answer in Rogers's office was: "There are only 90,000 people out there. Who gives a damn?"

I did. In fact, I was totally shocked by this remark. This seemed to me an inhuman approach to a situation involving human beings, and therefore totally wrong. If we think of 90,000 people only as statistics to be juggled around and resettled for reasons unacceptable to them, then an American mission of trusteeship—in Micronesia or anywhere else—is doomed to failure.

It was about this time that the expression "Hickel's Disease" turned up on the news tickers. The Associated Press, in a file from Washington dated June 25, 1969, observed that "frustrated Democratic leaders have come up with the term

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