

Micronesian Unity -- A Fragile Concept

Unity is a very fragile thing, especially if you're trying to put together a country. The best example of unity is probably our own country, the United States. Look at the problems our founding fathers had in getting together those diverse states, from New Hampshire to Georgia. Another, more current example would be the problems still facing such countries as Spain, where the Basques are looking for a split-off, or the Philippines, where the Moslems are unhappy about the Status Quo, or Ireland, Germany, Vietnam, or Korea.

Guam, by itself, would be fortunate, because we're only talking about one compact little island. But you could imagine trying to even unify a string of these islands, like the Marianas--with the same language, and the same cultural background. Is it any wonder, then, that the Micronesians have run into one continuous snag after another in trying to pull together a group of far flung islands, consisting of a dozen different languages, spread out over thousands of miles of ocean? They have little, really, to tie themselves together--except for some basic economic interests, the Congress of Micronesia, an airline, and the name, Micronesians.

The very name is just as fragile, because it was imposed upon them by some distant geographer, who said one day in fit of inspiration that all islands in the Pacific should be called Polynesian, Melanesian, or Micronesian.

This is all sort of sad, because at this stage we think we would like to see a new nation born in the Pacific, a nation of islands, a nation that would be receptive to trade and idea interchange with Guam.

The United Nations Trusteeship Council has expressed "genuine concern" over the declared intention of the Marshall Islands District to begin separate negotiations with the United States on its future status. The Council, in its annual report to the Security Council on the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, urged the United States, as the administering authority, "to preserve the unity of the Marshalls and the Carolines."

For the first time the islanders are getting a more or less firm date as to the termination of the trusteeship. The council expressed the hope, in their report, that the trusteeship could be terminated before 1981; the date projected by the United States. This date is still seven years away--and it may take that much time to pull the islands together. It is very likely, judging from the report signed by Australia, Britain and France, with the Soviet Union abstaining, that the Marianas split off will get Council approval, except for the Soviet Union. This could happen within two years.

We had hoped that the young people of the islands of Micronesia would have carried the torch of unity forward, because many of them now think of themselves as Micronesians. The only trouble is that they first think of themselves as Yapese, Palauans, Ponapeans, Trukese, etc. This is not that unusual. In the first hundred years of our country's history, we're sure that most people

thought of themselves as New Yorkers, or Virginians or Californians first, and Americans next.

Micronesian unity took another apparent battering in the election of delegates to the constitutional convention. Only about one-fifth of the registered voters in the Marshalls District turned out last June 4th, in defiance of the district legislature, and the traditional leadership which had advocated a complete boycott. Although nine delegates were elected in the Marshalls--some of them unopposed--their mandate is a feeble one.

The low Marshallese turn-out for the ConCon amounts to a ratification of the leadership position, which would be to negotiate a separate status, apart from the rest of Micronesia, when the trusteeship end. The vote increases the likelihood that the Marshallese will reject the constitution if their demands are not met--and herein lies a potential disaster for the people of Micronesia. There remains the possibility that a coming special session of the Congress of Micronesia will adopt amendments to the convention law that will appease the Marshallese.

Recently, a Star-Bulletin (Honolulu) reporter made a trip throughout Micronesia, and found that the fragility of the concept of a unified Micronesia, was the main impression gained in the trip. He said that the almost-certain separation of the Marianas, the revolt of the Marshalls, and the threats of Palau are based on a lack of common feeling among the people of Micronesia.

The Bulletin editorialized: "Although they have been ruled as a unit by a series of colonial powers for centuries, the Micronesians identify themselves with their home islands--corresponding roughly to the districts of the Trust Territory--and not with a Micronesian nation. Their languages and cultures are different, and their islands are scattered across a vast stretch of the Pacific. Only a young educated elite has had a chance to become familiar with the people of other districts than their own."

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They conclude: "In the face of indifference in the villages and conflicts of interest among the districts, it is not clear that Micronesia will survive the struggle over its birth. Yet it is difficult to conceive of the districts as viable separate political units. Perhaps the passage of time would dispel the disunity. The difficulty is that time is short. Micronesia's future is already being negotiated. Both the United Nations and Washington are eager to wind up what will soon be the last trusteeship on the books. The people of Micronesia, however, don't seem to be in any rush. In many cases, they don't understand why their present status can't continue."

Things may have been done differently, if a long time ago, say 10 years ago, the U.S. had decided that the islands would someday be independent, or a commonwealth tied to the U.S. and then worked in that direction with a strong program, including political education, and a program of pulling the islands closer together through a strong communication, and transportation system. This wasn't done, however. Instead, we decided to let them pretty much on their own, politically and unfortunately, it may not work out. Moreover, there doesn't seem to be any real way of going back, either. The sad part of all these seems to stem from a lack of a strong U.S. policy in the Pacific regarding the islands, a policy that would have been on-going and continuous. The U.S., because of this lack of a Pacific policy, will come in for criticism in the years ahead, at the way they botched up the Micronesians. This lack of policy, was in large part, created by differences of opinion between the Department of Defense, State, and Interior. We can sit back and blame the Micronesians for their split ups, and lack of unity, but the United States government should have had the foresight to see what was going to happen. We didn't have that vision, and we're certain that we'll come under increasing criticism for many years to come. JCM.