Micronesians ask: what next from the United States?

Micronesia: America's Unkept Promise

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Pacific News Service is a subsidiary of the Star-Bulletin, specializing in interpretative reporting of Pacific affairs.

Jones

Nolan

How U.S. 'Used' the Peace Corps

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(Second in a Series)

In late 1966 and early 1967 nearly a thousand young American men and women were dropped into the widely scattered islands of the Western Pacific.

They were Peace Corps Volunteers, sent to Micronesia, the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, for reasons adding up to a curious blend of expediency, politics and idealism.

For the Peace Corps itself the mission was the traditional task of helping the disadvantaged help themselves.

For the Interior Department, which administers the Territory, the Peace Corps was a source of abundant and relatively inexpensive manpower to do a job which to that point the U.S. had failed to do.

For the State Department, which also was involved in the venture, the reasons were political. The Volunteers were to overcome the sorry American record in Micronesia and mute criticism from the United Nations.

UNDERNEATH, lay the fundamental American policy, based on the self-interest of national defense, of persuading the Micronesians to affiliate permanently with the U.S.

The origins of the Peace Corps program are as murky as the motives are varied. But an inescapable conclusion is that at high levels in Washington—possibly including the White House—the Peace Corps was seen as a means to a political end.

This violated a basic precept: the Peace Corps, the Caesar's wife of the U.S. government, must always be apolitically above reproach.

Only in the larger and unselfish sense—the promotion of international understanding—is the Peace Corps supposed to be political. Its very effectiveness, the theory goes, rests on acceptance by other nations that the Peace Corps does not serve as an instrument of U.S. foreign policy.

Top Peace Corps officials, of course, could not have been unaware of the motives of the State Department. But, in pursuit of humanitarian ends, they concurred in this breaching of their own fundamental policy.

John Carver Jr., former Interior Department official who was lukewarm about the project, says flatly:

"They (top Peace Corps executives) quite consciously wanted to work as a State Department operation for political objectives in that area."

ON THE OTHER HAND, there was an imperative need for something like the Peace Corps in Micronesia. For years, the United States had neglected the islands and political, economic and human programs lagged deplorably.

There was no other practical source for the kind and extent of manpower needed. If the conventional agencies had failed, why be dogmatic about the propriety of using Peace Corps?

As it turned out, the Volunteers—to use one of the State Department's favorite nonwords—were in the early years "counter-productive." They not only did not help, they actually hindered the hopes of the political policy men.

Angered and disillusioned by the evidence of American neglect, the Volunteers encouraged the Micronesians to thought of eventual independence.

As one current Trust Territory official expresses it, "if the idea of putting Peace Corps in here was to propagandize the Micronesians, it worked in the opposite direction."

The State Department apparently was playing for the long run but the view from the top of Peace Corps was not quite that accommodating. Jack Vaughn, at the time director of Peace says this:

"There were some questions in certain elements in our government about how fast they wanted self-government for Micronesia. But we went blithly on the assumption that it should be as fast as possible."

Carver adds:

"The kids identified with the locals and against The Establishment."

Further: At the beginning, Peace Corps operations were inept. Relationships with the career civil servants in Micronesia were marked by mutual disdain.

THE REGULAR CIVIL SERVANTS resented the Volunteers as upstarts and the Volunteers returned the compliment by flaunting that assumed moral superiority which is the Peace Corps' own particular form of arrogance.

The Peace Corps, by a massive infusion of 940 Volunteers in the early months, had programmed itself into what Philip Waddington, Peace Corps' present top man in Washington for the Pacific and Asia, describes as an "administrative catastrophe."

The big input was unprecedented. It amounted to approximately one Volunteer for every 150 residents. Had the Peace Corps gone into India on the same population ratio, it would have meant between five and six million Volunteers.

Getting the Peace Corps episode in Micronesia into context requires some history. The United States took control of Micronesia under a United Nations trust agreement in 1947, promising to prepare the area for eventual self-government and/or independence.

American interest in the area was strategic-military, nothing more, and for several years little was done. Criticism mounted. For both humanitarian and pragmatic political reasons, President John F. Kennedy in 1963 sent the Solomon Mission to Micronesia to advise him how best to improve the lot of the people and at the same time insure their continued allegiance.

One recommendation of the Solomon Mission was for a modest Peace Corps program of 60 community development Volunteers. On its own merits, such a program was justifiable.

THE SOLOMON MISSION, however, coupled the proposed use of Peace Corps to another recommendation for a plebiscite, timed for 1967, when, it was assumed, various proposed economic and political efforts would pay off in a Micronesian vote to join the U.S. permanently. The Mission proposed using Peace Corps to help guarantee the outcome of the plebiscite.

The report never became formal policy and most of its political recommendations were disregarded. But its underlying theme, absorption of Micronesia for military reasons, was and still is policy.

What propelled the Peace Corps into Micronesia a few years after the Solomon Report apparently was the "Pritchard Memorandum," a document written by Ross Pritchard, then director of the East Asia-Pacific region of Peace Corps.

Pritchard is a driving, ambitious former football player who has since gone to financial reward as head of a private development operation in the Middle East. Backed by Jack Vaughn, Pritchard sparked a major Micronesia program.

The writers of this series were unable to get a copy of the Pritchard Memorandum. We were told both in the Trust Territory and in Peace Corps headquarters in Washington that it was not in the files. However, a former associate of Pritchard who was close to the Micronesia program gave this account of the memo:

"It was in response to a classified report by a U.N. ambassador who was on a visiting mission in 1965 or 1966. She found conditions deplorable. So there was a need for something like the Peace Corps to show we had a genuine concern."

THE REFERENCE apparently is to Angie Brooks of Liberia whose sharp criticisms of U.S. performance in Micronesia have been a continuing scourge. Her criticisms have been so severe that one Washington official referred to her as "Angie Pectoris."

Pritchard's associate continued:

"Pritchard suggested the possibility there was a wrangle whether Peace Corps had jurisdiction. Interior disputed our jurisdiction saying Micronesia was not overseas . . . State looked favorably on the idea from the start. They felt the United States had a responsibility for showing it was interested in fostering the welfare of the Micronesians and that the Peace Corps should advance that goal."

Further, he said, Joseph Sisco of the State Department was a "motivating factor" in getting the Peace Corps into Micronesia. Sisco, who is close to the White House, is now a top official in State for Middle Eastern affairs.

The point about "jurisdiction" is this:

Peace Corps cannot function in domestic areas; by law it must confine operations to foreign countries. Some officials in Interior, who did not want Peace Corps interfering in Micronesia, argued that since the area was administered by the United States, it was in fact a "domestic" area. There were those in Peace Corps who felt the same way, but their view did not prevail. Eventually, it was decided that Micronesia is "foreign."

What, basically, resolved the dispute over this vital technicality was that Stewart Udall, then Interior secretary, overruled subordinates who opposed a major Peace Corps program.

"I was all for it," Udall says. "In fact, I was probably more responsible for it than anyone else . . . It seemed to me that the Peace Corps couldn't help but improve things. I knew they would stir up controversy. But they were people with ideas and enthusiasm. I felt the Peace Corps would quicken the pace."

AT ONE POINT in this period, President Lyndon Johnson proposed to Congress that a definite date be set for a plebiscite by which the Micronesians would decide their future. The proposal died. But it fed speculation.

That is to say, there were some who believed the President sought to employ Peace Corps—at least in part—to help produce a favorable outcome for his proposed plebiscite. It is not possible to nail this down but there are these glimpses into motivation:

From a top Peace Corps staff officer in Micronesia:

"It's an elusive ghost. I have a feeling that whatever purpose moved the Peace Corps here came from the top down."

From the Peace Corps' Waddington:

"It's not clear to me who motivated or initiated but the White House was involved."

From Vaughn:

"Johnson told me personally and so did (Vice President) Humphrey and Udall that they were foursquare behind the project."

From William Norwood, Trust Territory high commissioner at the time:

"My understanding is that the decision to put the Peace Corps in stemmed largely from a growing concern at State that the drift of administration in Micronesia was causing increasing problems in the United Nations and something had to be done about it."

So something was done. The Peace Corps went in and for a time it thrashed and stumbled in its own overkill and rivalry with Interior officials. Today, cut back to a manageable 290 Volunteers, it is by all accounts making a material contribution to Micronesia, primarily in the training of teachers.

Yet amid the success there is an element of unease. Robert Currie, until recently deputy Peace Corps director in the Trust Territory, acknowledges a gnawing and unsatisfied curiosity about the origins of the program.

Currie says he has never felt used for political purposes, but he asks:

"This is an American-administered country so what in the American process brought us here? I have never found the answer. The Peace Corps works in foreign countries. Is Micronesia a foreign country? I have accepted that Micronesia is a foreign country."

TOMORROW: The military in Micronesia.

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Micronesia:

America's Unkept Promise

Hard-Nose Military Plan to Keep Islands Means...

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Third in a series

THE RADIOACTIVE mushroom clouds of U.S. atomic bomb tests erupted over a Micronesia atoll even before the United Nations granted formal authority for the American government to rule the far-flung islands as the Trust Territory of the Pacific.

These 1946 tests at Bikini underscored a rock-hard conviction in Washington: Micronesia was essential to U.S. military needs.

American troops had captured the islands during World War II at a cost of thousands of U.S. and Japanese casualties. The war was loaded with "turning points" such as the Battle of Midway, when the tide well could have gone against an unprepared America.

The cliff-hanging experience of the war convinced American planners that control of the islands was utterly necessary to the future security of the United States. That conviction was reinforced by the rise of China, the Korean War and, ultimately, Vietnam. The military obligation, after all, is to look beyond and envision the worst.

In a moment of candor about military interest in 1946, Warren R. Austin, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, told the Security Council:

"These islands constitute an integrated strategic complex vital to the security of the United States."

The area was considered so vital that the United States sought and won from the U.N. creation of a "strategic" trust, the only one of 11 trusteeships established by the U.N. after the war to be so designated. That designation put Micronesia under the Security Council rather than the General Assembly — with the result that the United States has veto power over any potential U.N. action affecting the territory.

Under the trust, the U.N. authorized the United States to "establish naval, military and air bases and to erect fortifications in the Trust Territory and to station and employ armed forces in the territory." This right was not included in any of the other 10 U.N. trusteeships.

In the same agreement, the United States promised to prepare the islands for self-government and to allow a free choice of status, including independence. That promise remains to be kept. And, by the testimony of many interviewed for this series, a chief stumbling block has been the military consideration.

That consideration has consistently prevailed with the U.S. Congress and in councils within the executive branch — and thus has prevailed over the pledge for a free choice by the Micronesians as to their political destiny.

The security interest cannot be discarded out of hand. But the problem is: the United States has not been telling this to the Micronesians or the rest of the world.

The practice, conscious or otherwise, has been to cloak the military interest in declarations of interest in the self-determination of Micronesia, even as security considerations have overridden the exercise of that self-determination.

Interestingly, the armed services have never actually done much in the way of developing bases in the islands. The Navy was on Saipan for a time but has long since left. The atomic testing has stopped. Military activity in Micronesia today is largely limited to the testing of anti-ballistic missiles at Kwajalein.

IN GENERAL, military interest in the area has been to deny it to other powers, meantime holding the vast territory in reserve against almost any conceivable eventual requirement.

After the World War II and during the early years of the trusteeship, the Navy ruled Micronesia. A tight security curtain was wrapped around the territory, making it extremely difficult to enter.

The Interior Department assumed jurisdiction over most of the area in 1951. On Eniwetok, the military conducted hydrogen tests, and on Saipan, the Central Intelligence Agency secretly trained troops from Taiwan for re-entering China.

Washington, meantime, continued with the so-called "zoo theory," policy ostensibly designed to protect the Micronesian culture from the incursions of outside money and influence. The languid "zoo approach" also provided

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U.S. Deceives Micronesians and Rest of the World

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a convenient excuse for keeping other countries, notably the Soviet Union and Japan, out of the territory.

Then came the Kennedy Administration with its curious mixture of hard-nosed pragmatism and let's-get-on-with the-job idealism.

"Those people out in Micronesia were in desperate condition, medically and economically," recalls Sargent Shriver, Kennedy's brother-in-law and at the time director of the Peace Corps.

"Many people thought it was disgraceful that we were doing so poorly out there," Shriver said in a recent interview.

JOHN A. CARVER JR., Kennedy's assistant secretary of the Interior, the man responsible at that time for supervision of the territory in Washington, says, "It became obvious in 1961 that it was really a serious starvation regimen."

The administration pressed Congress successfully for more funds and immediately set about planning rapid improvements in health, education, transportation and local government.

Carver also pushed the Navy to tear down its security fence. Robert Mangan, then and now aide to Carver, says, "It was difficult enough to get into Guam (an American territory) to say nothing of the Trust Territory."

In 1963, Kennedy dispatched the nine-member Solomon Mission to Micronesia. In its report to the President, treated at fuller length elsewhere in this series, the Solomon team noted:

"Despite a lack of serious concern for the area until quite recently, Micronesia is said to be essential to the United States for security reasons. We cannot give the area up, yet time is running out . . ."

Clearly, the Kennedy administration, as had the preceding Truman and Eisenhower administrations, considered the territory a strategic military necessity, to the point where the very thought of allowing Micronesia to go its own way if it wished was to think the unthinkable.

This attitude prevailed into the Johnson administration.

William Norwood, former long-time resident of Hawaii, who was high commissioner under Johnson; recalls that it was made clear to him in a variety of ways that independence was "not a realistic option." He adds:

"Defense made a forceful explanation to Congress as to why the islands were vital to U.S. security."

CERTAINLY, there were people in government who disliked or distrusted the military role in Micronesia.

Stewart Udall, Interior secretary at the time, says:

"I have always had a skepticism about the military mind and its desire to have too much land, too many bases. And once the military gets a piece of land they never let go, as Hawaii has found.

"I never could quite see the line of argument that those islands were going to be all that strategic. And, after all, they (the military) have Guam."

Others interviewed for this series echoed Udall's thought. That is, they speculate that although the argument of strategic need might have been valid in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the advance of military technology renders it far less so today.

Whatever the case, another highly placed civilian U.S. official during the mid-1960s says there is no doubt in his mind that the Pentagon long ago identified specific island sites it might eventually need for military bases. But, he says—as do others—the military has never clearly told civilian components of government what those requirements might be.

THE PENTAGON'S POSITION led to quarrels and frustrations among government departments in Washington. Meantime, confusion and bitterness arose in the Trust Territory. An example of the latter are the sit-ins held sporadically in the past two years by Kwajalein residents demanding more compensation for land used in missile testing and the eventual restoration of their property.

Harrison Loesch, an assistant secretary of the Interior who has been responsible for negotiating with the Micronesians, says it is difficult to determine the difference between actual and imagined land requirements of the military. He says:

"It's hard to pin down what Defense needs or what is just handy. The Defense Department doesn't want to bind itself because of the world situation."

Under the U.N. trust agreement, the U.S. government can use Micronesian lands by exercising the right of eminent domain.

"The military can take anything it wants without having to negotiate with any civil body," says a top civilian official. "And they want to keep it just like that.

"They do not think of the territory as a civil area. The colonels and the generals think of it as something they and their comrades took by force of arms when they were lieutenants and captains."

Despite the shroud of mystery surrounding Pentagon intentions in Micronesia, the military does get good marks for some of the work it performs in the territory.

TEAMS OF TECHNICIANS have been helping in construction projects in the islands and training Micronesians in the building trades. The military also has won gratitude from islanders for rescue and medical evacuation missions.

Used equipment and sometimes landing craft or other boats are occasionally turned over to the Micronesians who depend heavily on adequate sea transportation. And the annual air drop of Christmas packages is a goodwill gesture popular with inhabitants of some of the more remote islands.

But "fallback thinking"—the theory that Micronesia might someday be needed as a backyard base for military operations on the rim of Asia—continues to dominate at the Pentagon, where the idea of a neutral or independent Micronesia is unacceptable.

Secretary Loesch stresses that now "the big question is whether the United States will continue to exercise the right of eminent domain."

"The Micronesians," he says, "are worried that we might build some big goddamn bases out there, which we have no intention of doing at this time.

"And there is a legal question about whether the United States could exercise eminent domain anyway. The commonwealth proposal puts so many conditions on this that from a practical standpoint there is a question of whether the United States could exercise eminent domain.

"But we are unable to convince the Micronesians of this and it is the one big question in the negotiations."

(The commonwealth proposal, to be discussed in a subsequent article, was made last year — and promptly rejected by the Congress of Micronesia. It would insure continued American control of the area).

Loesch also says that "some retention (military) land can be loosened—we are open on that. It's one item we hope we can come to agreement on."

As American and Micronesian representatives prepare for the next round of status negotiations, a major question—perhaps a dominant question—is whether there can be a meeting of the Micronesian mind and the military mind.

TOMORROW: Generosity—and self-interest.