

Micronesia: America's Unkept Promise

Burning in More Ways Than One

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Last in a series

SHORTLY before sunrise one morning last February, fire lit the sky above Saipan's Capitol Hill, the headquarters of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands.

Two of three buildings of the Congress of Micronesia were destroyed. The fire was deliberately set.

The flames not only brightened the pre-dawn dark, they also threw into bold relief the growing discord among the inhabitants of the Trust Territory—Micronesians—about their political future.

IN FACT, the question of future political status has become a Chinese puzzle, to a large extent of American making. There are those in Micronesia who believe the United States has come close to outsmarting itself.

The United States took control of Micronesia under a United Nations trust agreement in 1947, promising to prepare the scattered islands for self-government and independence. But for nearly a quarter of a century American policy has avoided keeping that promise of a free choice.

Instead, the American goal has been to absorb Micronesia as a permanent affiliate of the United States.

The goal has been based on a single consideration: an assumption that Micronesia is vital to U.S. military security.

The fire on Saipan occurred the day after the legislation of the Mariana Islands—one of Micronesia's six administrative districts—unanimously stated an intent to withdraw from the Trust Territory "by force of arms if necessary."

The Saipan rebels said that unlike the rest of the territory they wanted permanent affiliation with the United States. Their theory was that such affiliation would improve their economy.

Of all the Pacific islands, the Marianas—Saipan, Tinian and Rota—have had the greatest exposure to things American. They have seen the prosperous example of the self-governing American territory of Guam, only 49 minutes away by air, and they enjoy superior facilities constructed by the U.S. Navy during its years of activity on Saipan.

But the pro-American Saipaners are a minority on the future status issue. The Congress of Micronesia's official position is for "free association" and, barring that, complete independence from American rule. The burning of Congress, although the arsonist has never been publicly identified, is believed to have been an act of political defiance by Saipanese activists dissatisfied with differences over status.

THE ONE status proposal from the United States has been the Nixon administration's offer of commonwealth, similar to that granted to Puerto Rico. That was made last year and the Congress of Micronesia quickly counter-proposed free association, to

which there has been no public U.S. response.

From the American point of view, the trouble with free association is that the Micronesians could withdraw any time and thus the United States would have no copervised guarantee for its defense concerns.

The commonwealth offer reflects American desire to insure perpetual control over the islands for security reasons.

The indications are strong that had the United States made its commonwealth proposal a few years ago, the Micronesians would have accepted readily. However, long years of neglect, together with a lack of candor about American intentions, have led to misgivings among Micronesians about permanent affiliation with the United States.

Eight years ago, President John F. Kennedy dispatched the Solomon Islands to Micronesia. In the preface of its report, the mission paid the usual obeisance to the United States and to all trust agreements and to all "make an informed and free choice as to their future."

But in a still classified section, the report proposed permit a plebiscite only at such time as stepped-up economic and political activities would have started the islands on a road to permanent affiliation.

SINCE THEN there has been off-and-on talk about a plebiscite. Lyndon Johnson sent a bill to Congress that would have ordered a plebiscite no later than June 30, 1972. It was killed.

As of 1971 there is no plan as to when there is no plan as to when the long-promised free choice.

Rogers Morton, the present Interior Secretary, says that it is too early for a plebiscite; that the Micronesians aren't ready.

A number of present and former government officials indicated to the writers of this series that a major reason for the wavering policy on plebiscite has been discussion among the State, Interior and Defense departments.

Likewise, the U.S. Congress has contributed to the confusion. Stewart Udall, Interior secretary under Kennedy and Johnson, says that during his time in office "some of our congressmen were acting as though they didn't believe in democracy."

The Nixon administration set up a special committee composed of representatives of State, Defense and Interior to iron out policy differences. It has not been all that successful.

A HIGH OFFICIAL of the Trust Territory says that State and Interior believe there must be a vote and that Defense accepts the idea reluctantly. But, he says, State wants a full range of options for the Micronesians to choose from; Interior wants fewer; Defense would allow only a choice between permanent affiliation and remaining in trust status.

So there it rests, the confusion in official Washington equal to the confusion among the Micronesians.

Udall says he foresees the problems that would arise from foot-dragging. He says:

"I felt all along that the Micronesians would go with us. The longer we waited the greater the risk. Crosscurrents would work against it (affiliation). It was a major blunder in not moving years ago toward a plebiscite."

Udall, it is pertinent to note, was the Cabinet officer directly responsible for Micronesia for eight years. During that time, he says, he regrets that he managed to visit the Trust Territory only once.

Even the Solomon Report, despite its Machavellean aspects, detected a strong sentiment for affiliation in 1963. The report said that a plebiscite at that time would produce a total vote for independence of no more than two to five per cent.

That has changed radically. Within the Congress of Micronesia, the best available barometer of Micronesian opinion, there is rising sentiment for independence. The entire seven-member delegation from Truk, together with four members from other districts—one-third of the total membership—has formed an Independence Coalition.

IN THE WAKE of the Saipan fire, President Nixon appointed Franklin Hayden Williams of San Francisco, president of the Asia Foundation, as his personal ambassador to negotiate the status question.

For one now ambassador at this stage it is an almost impossible situation. With whom does he negotiate? The pro-American leaders on Saipan? The free association elements within the Congress? The Independence Coalition?

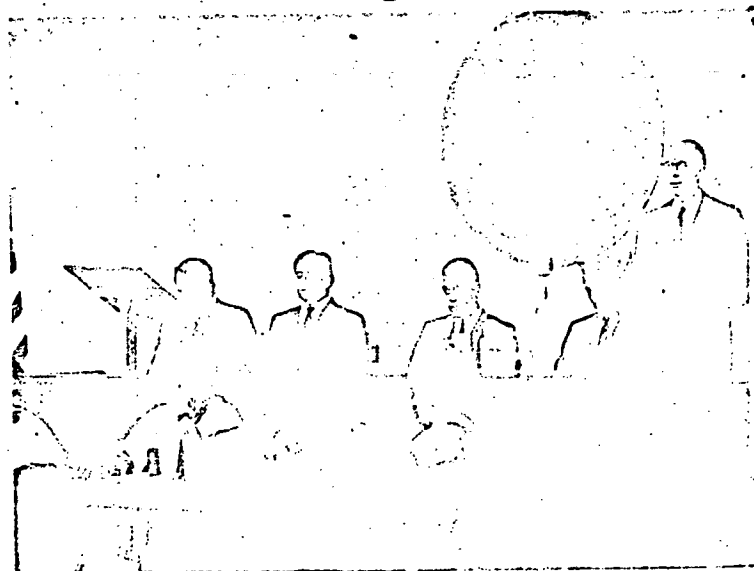
Recognizing the nature of the problem, Sen. Lorenzo Salati, chairman of the Congress' Joint Committee on Future Status, pleaded with his colleagues at a recent special session at Truk to hold together despite their disparate views. He told them:

"No discussion of political status can be honestly undertaken without recognition of the diverging positions within the Congress of Micronesia. . . . It is my firm conviction that all districts should take no action until after the receipt and examination of a new United States offer. Hopefully, such an offer will be one capable of satisfying all districts."

In a similar vein, Rep. Felipe Atalig of the separatist Mariana Islands, said:

"We are all bound together under the trusteeship agreement and we must all bargain with the United States prior to its termination. I believe that in spite of our differences it is vital that we bargain among ourselves before we negotiate with our opponent."

MEANTIME, the United States has informed the United Nations that it does not intend to negotiate status separately with the Mariana district. So at least the United States and the Congress of Micronesia are of one



High Commissioner Ed Johnston, formerly of Honolulu, addresses Micronesian Congress.

mind on one point: the future of Micronesia must be settled on a territory-wide basis.

Back of the growing sentiment for independence is a concern among Micronesian leaders, excepting a minority of those on Saipan, about loss of identity. Meager as it was for years, American economic assistance did nevertheless acustom Micronesians to some of the trappings of modern industrial society, such as the automobile, airplane service and TV.

The Micronesians are ambivalent, on the one hand desiring to enjoy material things, but on the other hand fearful that their traditional way of life will be submerged.

In conventional Western terms, independence for Micronesia does not appear viable; the islands would still need outside help to maintain even the present low-level economy.

THE ALTERNATIVE would be a material drop in wellbeing which at least some Micronesian leaders appear willing to endure.

One such is Rep. Hans Wilander of Truk. He recently told the Congress:

"My independence we mean the opportunity for Micronesia to control its own destiny unaltered by foreign interests. That I decisions about Micronesia will made by Micronesians."

"If the precious resources of Micronesia are controlled by foreign countries, this is not independence. If the government and economy of Micronesia depend upon foreign aid which can be withheld at any time this is not independence. Above all, if there are military bases and foreign soldiers under foreign orders on our islands this is not independence."

Wilander went on to say that the price of independence would be high and difficult "for those of us who have grown accustomed to the luxuries of American society. But we must be prepared to sacrifice, hopefully for a short time."

"Most basic" is the choice between remaining always the dependent child of a foreign power, obedient but with our needs taken care of, or becoming

an adult nation, not rich in luxuries, but rich in peace and happiness for our people, and free."

There for the present the situation rests, a tangle that will take extreme patience and skill for Ambassador Williams and the Congress of Micronesia to unsnarl. And, on the record, it is a tangle resulting largely from American fondness for playing a devious game on the matter of free choice.

IN PASSING, the observer cannot help but be struck by how the Salis, Atalig and Wilanders have learned to toss back the thoughts of the 18th Century American revolutionists to their current successors in Washington.

Even men who tried to do a good job in Micronesia, caught perhaps in the bureaucracy's internal impurities, seemed to fall into the practice of substituting their

own views for the language of the trust agreement.

One of these was William Norwood, a former high commissioner.

"We understood," says Norwood, "that independence was not a realistic option in Washington's view."

"When I was appointed, I understood that an early decision on political future was a basic objective. I honestly felt then and honestly feel now that the best future for the people of Micronesia rests in some form of continuing relation with the U.S., so I did not have too much problem with my conscience as long as our administration was in consultation with the Micronesians on what they wanted."

But the history is, on the testimony of Norwood and others, that the consultation was consistently less than candid. The main point is

that individual and governmental convictions on what is best for Micronesia is not the issue. The issue is that the United States a quarter of a century ago promised the people the Micronesians to make their own decision.

Over the years, the Washington determination of what is "best" for the Micronesians seems to have been unwaveringly influenced by an American perception of what is best for the United States. And, until the Micronesians could agree with the American perception, not much chance for choice. That, in essence, is the meaning of 25 years of American strategic colonialism in the Western Pacific.

Twenty-five years ago the United States promised the United Nations to prepare Micronesia for self-government and permit it to make a free choice of political destiny, including independence. The promise remains unkept.

To trace the history of America's adventure in modern-day strategic colonialism in the Pacific, Gardner B. Jones, editor of Pacific News Service, and Webster K. Nolan, features editor of the Honolulu Star-Bulletin, interviewed scores of officials in the Trust Territory and Washington. The result is this five-part series which started



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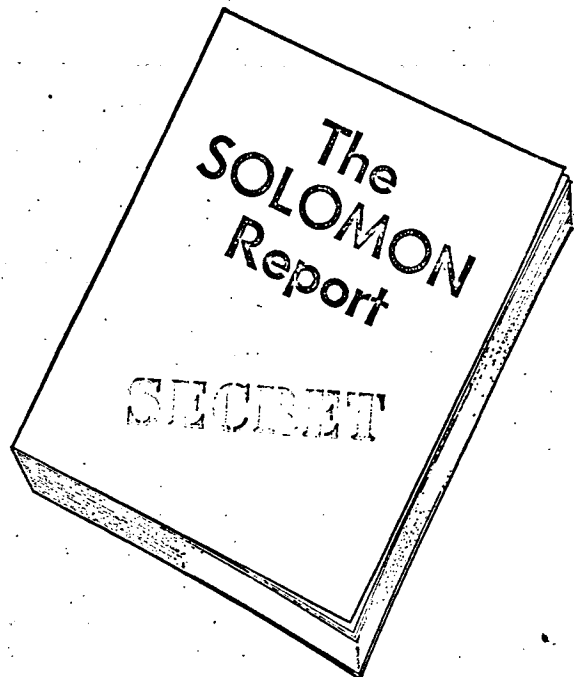
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Pacific News Service is a subsidiary of the Star-Bulletin, specializing in interpretative reporting of Pacific affairs.

Gardiner B. Jones



Webster K. Nolan



U.S. Colonialism in the Pacific

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Part of Five Articles

ON THE day John F. Kennedy was shot there lay somewhere in the White House a gamey document known as "The Solomon Report."

Part of the report still is classified secret. This part was intended to be a blueprint for the United States absorption of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. The Micronesians to permit the islands to make a free choice of political destiny, including independence, after a period of tutelage in self-government.

Extensive inquiry in Washington and in the Trust Territory by the writers of this series establishes that the Solomon Report never became a formally adopted, definitive statement of U.S. policy. The more rancid portions of the report apparently died with Kennedy.

EVEN SO, the central theme of the report—that for military reasons the United States could not accept anything but a Micronesia subject to its perpetual control—remains the core of Washington policy today.

American interest in the Trust Territory flows from a single consideration: national defense. American policymakers have wanted the islands for possible bases—and to keep other military powers out.

The United States has never had any measurable economic interest in the area.

Actually, Micronesia is a political fiction, an administrative convenience created by the United Nations. There is little cultural, historical or geographical unity among the groups of islands. Likewise, there is virtually no common tie between the islands and the United States to justify making Micronesia a permanent part of the nation.

In one sense, the Solomon Report is an historical curiosity. But eight years later it remains important for the light it throws on the thinking that has guided nearly 25 years of American strategic colonialism in the Pacific.

The report is Exhibit A of what can happen to protestations of free choice for all when they collide with national self-interest as defined by the military establishment. Performance does not match rhetoric, and this, in essence, is the story of American stewardship in the Pacific Islands.

THE CYNICISM is not as absolute as it may seem. All along there were men of goodwill who wanted to do right by the Micronesians. But they repeatedly ran into one or more of several roadblocks.

One was the declining hand of the military. Another was resistance from congressmen who would not or could not see the problem in human terms, who consciously or unconsciously believed that free choice might be all right for advanced societies but not for relatively primitive islanders.

Still another was a continuing bureaucratic tangle in Washington in which the departments of State, Defense and Interior could never sort out a common policy. The gigantic government apparatus of a modern industrial nation could not pull itself together to deal with the peculiar problems of Micronesia.

Actually, a strong case could be made that Micronesia's best advantage does lie with the United States. An equally strong argument could be made for affiliation with Japan which ruled the islands before World War II—and with far better results than produced by the United States.

But the point here—and a central point of these articles—is that for all its devotion to self-determination, for all its preaching to the rest of the world, for all the human concern by individual administrators, the United States has consistently gone to every length to avoid keeping its pledge of a free choice in Micronesia. When all the underbrush of rationalization and argumentation is cleared away, the United States has simply not been willing to permit that free choice.

THIS COUNTRY has professed one thing and done another. What it has done in consonance with its ideals has often been out of a mixture of motives, frequently out of political necessity and fear of embarrassment, with humanitarian concerns and the nation's word at the bottom of the pile.

If there has been a consistent thread it has been the military consideration. One high American close to the matter says:

"As long as free ideas don't threaten Defense's concept of national security, they make no trouble. American officials will say their policy is the trust agreement. But if someone asked the President to sign that agreement as an expression of policy, he would not."

The writers were told repeatedly by civilian administrators that the Defense Department has never clearly and specifically stated its requirements in Micronesia.

IRONICALLY, there are informed persons who believe that had this country been candid and decisive with the Micronesians, maybe a clear statement to them about mutual advantage, they would long ago have chosen readily to affiliate with the United States.

With the exception of a personal expression of his own hopes for continuing affiliation by the current high commissioner, Ed Johnson, formerly of Honolulu, no such statement has ever been made.

One of those regretting the lack of candor is William Norwood, former high commissioner of the Trust Territory now with a construction firm on Guam. He says:

"One of our basic problems was that we were not completely honest with the Micronesians about our objectives."

"I mean, we were presumably committed to the trust agreement, but at the same time it was our objective to... I would say that at a sense we were trying to buy the votes."

In recent years, the United States has stepped up efforts to make up for years of neglect. There has been vigorous advances in education, health and other programs and in hastening the Micronesians toward self-government.

The motivation has been decent on one level—but still there is that underlying and controlling idea of luring the islands into becoming part of the United States.

Now it may be too late. The pressure intensifies for an early decision on Micronesia's future. The Micronesians are divided and among a majority of them, as reflected in the Congress of Micronesia, the hearts and minds battle appears to be going against the United States.

Simply put, having been taken for granted for so long the Micronesians are no longer sure whether to trust the United States.

NOW HERE IS WHAT the United States pledged to do in the trust agreement by which the United Nations gave this country control of the Pacific Islands in 1947:

"Foster the development of such political institutions as are suited to the trust territory... and promote the development of the inhabitants of the trust territory toward self-government or independence as may be appropriate to the particular circumstances of the trust territory and its peoples and the freely-expressed wishes of the peoples concerned."

Through the trust agreement, the members of the U.N. including the Soviet Union, recognized America's primary strategic interest. It was a new round in the old "sphere of influence" power game. The U.N., in effect, certified the Western Pacific as an American lake.

With the Pacific frontier secured, the Truman and Eisenhower administrations viewed the American obligation largely as that of caretaker.

There seems to have been in those years no concerted effort to mount the programs required for the people of Micronesia. No effort was made to restore the relatively thriving economy developed under Japanese colonial administration and destroyed during the war. For several years, Trust Territory headquarters was located in Honolulu—until someone got the radical idea that perhaps the top administrators ought to move a few thousand miles out to what they were administering.

For a time, part of the territory actually was administered by the U.S. Navy—and a light security screen held civilian visitors to a minimum.

The budget ceiling was \$4.5 million a year for 100,000 persons inhabiting islands scattered over three million square miles of ocean; the ceiling is now \$65 million. Everything languished.

When the Kennedy administration assumed power it was alarmed by the plight of the Micronesians. It was equally alarmed by increasingly sharp criticism from the U.N. and by the fact that other trusteeships created in the wake of the war were winding down, leaving the United States increasingly visible in its lack of performance.

SO THE SOLOMON MISSION was dispatched, headed by Anthony Solomon, then of Harvard Business School and later a top official in the State Department.

On Oct. 9, 1953, the Solomon Mission reported. Six weeks later Kennedy was dead in Dallas. Two sections of the Solomon Report dealt with economic, health and educational programs. These sections were made public in 1958. They provided the rationale for subsequent increases in the budget ceiling.

The other section concentrated on political devices for insuring that the Micronesians would choose permanent affiliation with the U.S. The section remains classified but was made available a few weeks ago by a Micronesian student in Honolulu, Francisco Tubana, an agitator for total independence. The writers of this series have established beyond question that the humanitarian recommendations in the remainder of the report were designed as much to buy the loyalty of the Micronesians as to help them.

This portion also acknowledged that the policy it embraced would be "moving country to the anticolonial movement that has just about completed sweeping the world" and that the United States would be "breaching its own policy since World War I of not acquiring new territorial possessions."

Further, the report said that if, in its efforts to take over Micronesia, the United States should run afoul of world opinion, it might have to "proceed with a series of actions that would make the trusteeship a dead issue..."

THE REPORT URGED a plebiscite by 1957—preceded by such a barrage of economic input and simulated self-government activity that the Micronesians would almost automatically vote to join the United States.

Among the report's specific recommendations:—A government organization for Micronesia, including a legislature of hand-picked members, that "gives on the one hand a reasonable appearance of self-government... but on the other hand retains adequate control through continuation of an appointed high commissioner."

—Virtually total power for the high commissioner, including power to "declare martial law and assume all legislative and executive powers when the security of the United States so requires." Also power to veto all laws and dissolve the Micronesian legislature "at any time."

—Introduction into Micronesian schools of "U.S.-oriented curriculum changes and patriotic rituals."

—Propagandizing of the Micronesians by American administrators—especially selected for the purpose—and by the U.S. Peace Corps, the latter in total violation of the idealistic principles of the organization formed by Kennedy two years earlier.

Although the basic idea behind them lives on, most of these recommendations died stillborn. But the Peace Corps eventually did go to Micronesia; and the State Department, envisioning a semipolitical role for it, played a big part in getting it there.

But those in Washington who thought in Solomon Report terms that the volunteers would serve a political end were quickly disbursed.

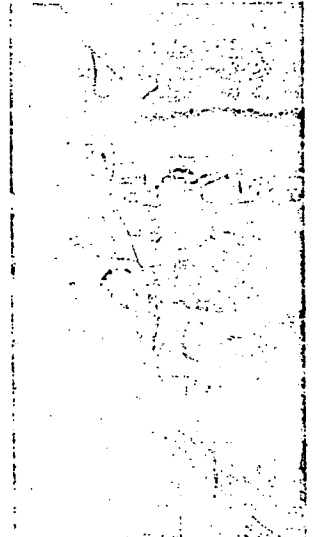
Being in the idealism business, the volunteers actually worked against the goal of Washington policymakers. The volunteers contributed materially to the growth of doubts among Micronesians about the wisdom of tying themselves to the United States. The current disarray among Micronesians about future status is partly due to the volunteers.

One member of the Solomon Mission was a Guamanian, Richard Taitano, at the time director of the Office of Territories in the Interior Department. Taitano says using Peace Corps in Micronesia was a "back door" effort and an acknowledgement of failure by traditional government agencies.

Taitano expresses his view of the overall American performance in the Pacific:

"For a long time we were imperialists and never wanted to recognize that fact."

TOMORROW: The Peace Corps episode.



JAPANESE GUNS—These Japanese guns fired their last rounds in July 1944, before U.S. forces captured Saipan, the headquarters today of the U.S. Trust Territory, in one of World War II's costliest battles.