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# PAWN IN THE PACIFIC

DONALD F. SMITH

ALTHOUGH THE U.S. military relinquished formal control of most of Micronesia twenty years ago, its return is imminent in the view of many Micronesian and American observers. With the scheduled reversion of Okinawa to Japan in 1972 and continued Philippine insistence on the renegotiation of military base agreements with the United States, pressure is forcing American strategists in the Pentagon to examine the possibilities of shifting U.S. military facilities to areas on our own soil (such as Guam) or those under our control, such as the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. Because Guam is small—209 square miles—the military does not want to put all its eggs in that one basket, which inevitably raises the question of the Trust Territory.

Micronesia, that part of Oceania known as the United States Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, occupies an enormous zone of the western Pacific north of the Equator. Covering an area of approximately three million square miles, equivalent to the continental United States in size, it extends through four time zones, approaching Japan and Hawaii on its northern and eastern reaches and abutting New Guinea on the south and the Philippines on the west. For administrative purposes, it is divided into six districts. Micronesia, the literal meaning of which is "tiny islands," is one of the three great geographic subdivisions of the islands of the Pacific, the better known being Polynesia and Melanesia. The three major archipelagoes which

make up Micronesia—the Marshall, Caroline, and Mariana Islands, excluding Guam—lie scattered across the vast western Pacific like strings of beads. There are approximately 2,100 small islands of all shapes, which vary in size from a large volcanic mass of 158 square miles to tiny sandspits.

A look at a map of the area reveals the Trust Territory's greatest resource: its strategic location militarily, which places almost every point in the Pacific and Asia within striking distance of the islands. Military historians have not let this fact pass unnoticed, although it has been a little publicized reason for America's desire to maintain control of the area. Always sensitive to the charge of military colonialism, the United States has played down its missile facility on Kwajalein in the Marshall Islands for fear of damaging its standing with nonwhite peoples in the United Nations, where criticism of projected military bases has been leveled by African, Asian, and Communist-bloc countries.

After World War II, the U.S. Navy administered the islands of Micronesia on an interim basis until 1951, generally exciting no enthusiasm and little

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admiration. The task of rehabilitation that faced the military government was colossal, and it is questionable whether the Navy, which was merely marking time in the islands, was well suited to restoring a viable economy. Much of the land area of Micronesia, devastated by war or taken over for military installations from 1945 on, soon fell into disuse. The economy stagnated as the Japanese, its mainstay, were rounded up and shipped back to Japan after the war. The infrastructure built up by Japan for some thirty years was wiped out, and to this day roads, transportation, and utilities are lacking.

In 1951, administrative responsibility for the Trust Territory was transferred from the Navy to the Department of the Interior. Successive executive orders in 1952 and 1953, however, returned the administration of Saipan, Tinian, and the rest of the Mariana Islands to the Secretary of the Navy. Ten years later, in 1962, a major change occurred when another executive order transferred the Northern Marianas back to the Secretary of the Interior. The question of what the military was doing in the Marianas during this time arises. While the entire picture is not clear, sketchy information from reliable sources indicates that on Saipan the Navy was a front organization for the CIA, which was training Nationalist Chinese agents for infiltration into mainland China. One need only visit Saipan today and see the facilities developed by the military to realize that whatever they did there during that ten year period, it was done on a grand scale with the American taxpayers' money.

The first ten years of civilian administration back in the 1950s, like the Navy's previous five, generally are not looked upon with enthusiasm and admiration by observers of the Micronesian scene.

But beginning with the Kennedy Administration a new day has prevailed in the development of the territory. The budget has been increased from \$7.5 million to \$60 million, although the Micronesians feel that

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Most of the budgetary increase goes for higher salaries and fringe benefits for American personnel in the territory, leaving little for the economic development of the islands. There is some truth in this, but evidence indicates that substantial progress has taken place in the last decade.

A universal, free, coeducational system now encompasses grades one through twelve. While there is not space enough for all who should attend high school in some of the districts, the educational system is one of America's outstanding successes in the islands. The status of women has improved; several women were elected to the first Congress of Micronesia in 1965. The declining mortality rate in relation to an increasing population is evidence of a rising health and sanitation level. Perhaps the most notable success of the civilian administration has been fostering of the growth of democratic institutions, which may well be our greatest gift to the Micronesians.

Micronesia has been embroiled in controversy during the past year because of the proliferation of rumors regarding the impending use of its tiny islands for U.S. military purposes. These rumors have gained momentum with the expected reversion of Okinawa to Japan and with the rising nationalism in the Philippines. Micronesians are concerned that their islands could well become the new defense bastion of America in the western Pacific. The military has not helped its case by denying interest in the area while at the same time it has sent scouting teams to all the districts to check old airfields, harbor installations, and other aspects of the infrastructure.

Conflicting feelings toward the military exist in the islands. Nostalgically, some of the older Micronesians, particularly the Chamorros of the Marianas, remember the economic benefits brought by the Naval administration of the 1940s and 1950s. Jobs were plentiful. The Marianas' standard of living was substantially higher than the rest of Micronesia because of a

higher wage scale. The introduction of an artificial wage economy, however, doomed the development of agriculture in the islands.

While the northern Marianas benefited from the presence of the U.S. military—and sentiment among many in the business community for its return is evident—the rest of Micronesia quickly stagnated and became a backwash of American interest. Despite this neglect and the mistakes made by the military, the people of the "tiny islands" have expressed appreciation of its presence in resolutions adopted by local legislatures and the Congress of Micronesia.

Why is the military opposed so strongly in the islands, even though the economic consequences of bases are appreciated by many of the older and some of the younger and better educated Micronesians?

The fundamental issue is land. Land was originally owned by clans and administered by chiefs. Private ownership was instituted under the pre-World War I regime of the Germans and continued by the Japanese and Americans. Are the people of Micronesia to be regarded now as landowners? Or is land tenure to be swept away? This is the basic issue because it involves the destiny of the Micronesian people and the whole character of the future relationship between Micronesia and the United States. Resolution of this issue will determine whether the Micronesian people develop along the lines of freedom or along the lines of serfdom—and whether America will act as trustee or exploiter.

The 2,100 islands of the Trust Territory, while scattered over an immense area of the western Pacific, constitute together little more than half as much land area as does Rhode Island, our smallest state.

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economy. The U.S. military has been unable to come to grips with this cultural and economic fact. It has failed to perceive that the welfare and progress of the islanders demand a land policy that will be of benefit to the people themselves. The small land area in Micronesia must support a population approaching 100,000, and growing at an overall rate of four per cent a year. To add to the subsistence problem in the islands, their rugged terrain and low soil fertility result in low production.

Perhaps the Marshall Islands, the easternmost district and the one most lacking in land, have felt the pressure and presence of military needs for the longest time. With only seventy square miles of dry land to accommodate 19,000 Marshallese, some would consider it a crime to take any of the land, no matter what the circumstances. Yet this eastern gateway to Micronesia is probably better known to the average American than any of the other districts because of our nuclear testing sites at Bikini and Eniwetok.

The people of both Eniwetok and Bikini had extremely well integrated societies bound together through kinship ties and association, and their most treasured possession was, and is, land. They were not prepared for the shocking loss of their familiar environment and collapse of their island world, which had given them security both as individuals and as a group. The Navy informed these island people that their homelands would have to be sacrificed in the interests of science. The Pentagon rationalized the taking of Bikini atoll on the grounds that the island provided better control of the atomic cloud and was of little value, since the land was covered with low, scrubby bush, and at best provided the inhabitants with only a marginal existence.

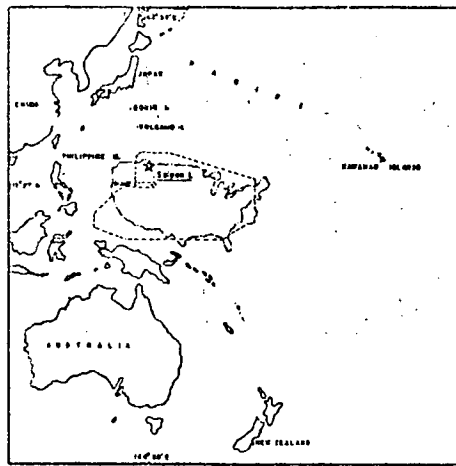
Upon being informed that their island would be needed for scientific purposes, Chief Judah consulted with his people and told the Navy that if the United States needed their land, the Bikinians were willing to surrender it. It is doubtful the chief could have given any other answer since the land was to be taken anyway. The people assumed that they could return

the testing was completed despite attempts by the Navy to convince them that their return would be impossible. The Bikinians naively felt that what the Pentagon could do, it could also undo, and that it would be responsible for restoring the atoll to its pre-testing condition.

After debating alternative islands, Rongerik atoll, 150 miles east of Bikini, was selected by the Bikinians for relocation. The Navy did not know at the time that this atoll had a reputation throughout the Marshalls as a "bad place." Nor did the Bikinians, who expected to return to their own island, mention the legend of "Libokora," since they were certain they would be on Rongerik only a short time and felt such a matter too small to mention. Because of its association in the past with the evil spirit "Libokora," who dealt in poisons, the whole lagoon was considered taboo to the Marshallese people. The Naval administration, unfamiliar with local lore, might have asked why the islands of Rongerik had been uninhabited for such a long time. The situation might have been avoided had they consulted with American missionaries who were active in the islands and well acquainted with Marshallese lore and mythology. After nearly starving to death on Rongerik because they were afraid to fish and drink the water, the islanders, with their consent, were relocated on Kili.

To make an unpleasant story still sadder, a press release issued by the Atomic Energy Commission, December 1, 1947, after the Bikini explosion, stated that Eniwetok would be the new site for the proving grounds because "Bikini is not suitable as the site since it lacks sufficient land surface for the instrumentation necessary to the scientific observations which must be made." Why wasn't such a decision made before the Bikini tests, thus avoiding the transplanting and disruption of a small people's homeland and whole way of life? It was only this past year that Bikini was declared safe; the island people are now, with U.S. Government assistance, in the process of returning.

Next to go was Eniwetok, in 1947. The Navy, smarting from criticism for



Courtesy Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands Government

### Vicinity map

its removal of the Bikinians, proposed to move the Eniwetokese to Ujelang Island, then uninhabited government land. As a formal gesture, the two Eniwetok *iroijs* (landowning chiefs), Ebream and Joanej, were flown to Ujelang to inspect the island. Naval reports indicated that the chiefs reacted favorably to Ujelang as a home for the Eniwetokese. The Navy also reported the islanders eagerly went ashore to their new home. However, a former Micronesian workman on the ship that took the Eniwetokese 120 miles across the open ocean to Ujelang recalled that the people had gone ashore weeping, contradicting the Navy's reports. In another interview, *iroij* Joanej denied that he and Ebream praised Ujelang, as indicated in the Naval reports. Asked why he signed away Eniwetok, he said that it was because he trusted the Navy.

The civil administrator of Kwajalein, after visiting the Eniwetokese settled on Ujelang, painted a rosy picture of the people and their new island. He said that Ujelang would become a garden spot of the Pacific and the wealthiest and most productive atoll in the Marshalls. This tragically short-sighted prophecy never came true. Twenty years later, Ujelang had firmly established itself as one of the worst islands in the Pacific. The island had been virtually taken over by rats, which competed with the people for—

and often won—the small amount of food grown there. The problem became so serious that there were few coconuts to eat and none to sell. So unhappy were the people that several years ago they swarmed onto a field trip ship, determined to leave the ill-fated island and move elsewhere. Finally, within the past two years, measures have been taken by the Government to eradicate the rats on Ujelang.

Another illustration of the Naval administration in the Marshalls was the taking of Kwajalein Island for a Naval facility and the site of the Pacific Island Missile Testing Range. The Marshallese population was transferred to Ebeye Island, three miles from Kwajalein, which over the years became the most appalling example of a "hell hole," known to some as "the slum of the Pacific." The island was overcrowded and the living conditions miserable, but it took a polio epidemic in the early 1960s to bring to Washington's attention the terrible situation existing there.

The forced removal of the Marshallese people from their lands by the military, along with the inadequate compensation given them, has left a legacy of bitterness that still plagues the American civilian administration in the islands, which must share some of the blame for past mistakes in the Marshalls. Since the civilian administration did not protect the people's lands, as many felt it should, and did not stand up for the natives' rights, it also is suspect by many Micronesians.

Examples in other districts of Micronesia also indicate little concern for the land needs of the indigenous communities.

On Truk, which has the largest population in the territory and yet the smallest land area—only forty-six square miles—and which always faces a serious overpopulation problem, the U.S. military did not endear itself to the people through its land tenure policy.

During the Naval administration, the natives of Fono were removed so that a military recreation area could be developed on the island. In another

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ough arbitrary action and without consulting the island chief, decided that the reef island of Sanat would make a good site for a leper colony, without consideration of the economic effect it would have. Although the food production capacity of Sanat greatly exceeded the requirements of the few lepers isolated there, the original owners of the island were not permitted to use their land or to harvest the food.

In the Palau district the disaffection with the U.S. military administration centers around the destruction of all former Japanese installations by misguided U.S. military officers at the end of World War II. The Palauans felt that this destruction was unjustified and served no useful purpose because the war was ended. They feel they should have been compensated for the wanton destruction of buildings and facilities. At the time, they claim, they did not protest the U.S. military's action since they thought the purpose was to replace the adequate Japanese structures with better built American ones. Many Palauans feel that some sort of compensation is long overdue them, and this issue remains a festering sore.

Recently, a land program has been instituted in Micronesia for the purpose of searching, clearing, and registering land titles for the people. Many observers hope that this program will also settle the question of who has title to the so-called "public lands," lands which were acquired by the Japanese from the Micronesians without just compensation, and of which the U.S. Naval administration, in turn, claimed ownership after the war. Evidence indicates that the American administration is now searching for documents in Japan, Australia, and other Asian countries to support and authenticate its claim to title of these public lands.

Some Micronesians feel that the U.S. administration's main motive is to retain the island's public lands for the eventual establishment of military bases. They are concerned that the land registration program was designed to secure the title claims of the U.S. administration to the public lands and that benefits to individual Micronesians will be only secondary.

The question of whether the islands of Micronesia should be kept out of the hands of the military has already been answered by history. Micronesia's strategic location offers only one response. The Japanese used the islands to build an empire, and the United States today uses them for testing advanced missile weaponry. Our military has an important stake, from its viewpoint, in the land that is currently being utilized in Kwajalein and Eniwetok. It is also true, as evidenced by military activity in the last two years such as visits by high ranking officials and the repair of airfields, that it would like to acquire more land in the Carolines and Marianas for future military bases.

These security interests will determine the basis of any future political status agreement acceptable to the United States. Micronesian leaders are aware of America's long-standing strategic interest in their islands and are willing to negotiate a reciprocal binding contract that is mutually satisfactory to both sides. In fact, from an economic standpoint, Micronesians see their land as the only reason for U.S. interest in their islands, and they are determined to drive as hard a bargain as possible in obtaining the best possible terms for these lands. The vast sums of money they hope to obtain from the military could then be used to develop Micronesia.

Aware that the basis of any future political status must take into account America's strategic interests in Micro-

nesia, the members of the Congress of Micronesia Future Political Status Commission in their recent report recommended, as their first choice, free association with the United States. The essential feature of such a partnership would be the negotiation of a reciprocally binding contract that gives substance to a mutually beneficial, stable, and enduring voluntary partnership. Negotiations between the U.S. representatives and the Congress of Micronesia have recently reached a stalemate because the United States is finding it difficult to accept the concept of such contract negotiations, and rejects the principle of "unilateral termination" and, indirectly, the idea of Micronesia's legal sovereignty.

Under free association, the Micronesians would control their internal destiny, receive substantial economic and material support from the United States, and as long as the relationship was mutually satisfactory both sides would have their interests and desires met. The Micronesians would run their own domestic affairs, elect their leaders, develop their economy along their own lines, and the United States' strategic interests would be met through leasing land for bases and representing the Micronesians in foreign affairs. Either side could, at any time, express the desire to terminate the agreement unilaterally.

The Nixon Administration has rejected the recommendation of the Congress of Micronesia for free association status, and in turn, the Micronesians have rejected the U.S. proposal of commonwealth status.

The Future Political Status Commission recommends that failure of the United States and Micronesia to reach agreement would leave the Micronesians with no alternative other than to seek independence.

At the heart of the difficulties surrounding the present negotiations is the belief by well meaning but poorly informed Americans that the people of Micronesia desire to become Americans. This attitude makes it difficult for our political leaders to see any alternatives for the Micronesians other than commonwealth status or remaining a quasi-colony of the United States. The prospect of the Micro-

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nesians choosing independence, with its potential of economic disaster, is difficult for them to comprehend, although the preference for autonomy by poor mini-states (Malta, Fiji, Western Samoa) is one of the political realities of our time.

The prospects for any of these approaches will depend on the United States' desire to exercise, in fact, the concept of self-determination that underlies the American principle. If we adhere to our professed beliefs, then we must be prepared to accept the possibility that the Micronesians, faced with the prospect of irrevocable association with the United States, will reserve the right of not only turning down that prospect, but of pursuing a course of development diametrically opposed to the one we would like them to follow. Our State Department believes that the trusteeship agreement between the United States and the United Nations recognizes the legal and moral right of Micronesia to self-determination, but the Pentagon continues to press the argument that our national defense requirements preclude any hope of Micronesian independence.

Representative Wayne Aspinall, Colorado Democrat, and chairman of the House Interior Committee, has made no secret of the fact that he would like to see Micronesia a part of the United States. Former Secretary of the Interior Walter Hickel was even more blunt. The United States, said Hickel, simply "is not going to give up Micronesia."

If the outcome of negotiations on the political future of Micronesia should eventually find our military once again turning the islands into defense bastions, then the U.S. Government must demonstrate that the island peoples' welfare comes first and military necessity second. In the eyes of the Micronesians, actions speak louder than words. Past actions of the military are the only evidence the Micronesians have to go by, and those actions have revealed that time after time indigenous welfare has been needlessly sacrificed by arbitrary military decisions regarding land ownership, the only form of social security in a subsistence economy.

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