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Micronesia: Key to the Pacific

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STEP-BULLETIN

16DEC

By Hanson Baldwin

FOR A NUMBER of reasons, the islands of Micronesia are absolutely vital to the long-range security of the United States. They extend the potential range of U.S. sea and air power by thousands of miles, yet are not close enough to the continent of Asia to be militarily vulnerable or politically provocative. Except for Guam, they are the only islands in the western Pacific that fly the American flag, and the only forward-base sites in the Pacific that might substitute in part for Okinawa, the Philippines and Japan.

They provide potential early-warning sites for electronics installations to monitor trans-Pacific aircraft and communications. Long-range patrol aircraft, based on these islands, could track Soviet submarines bound for the shipping lanes of the central Pacific. Some of the islands form part of our Pacific missile test range and also offer sites for monitoring Russian missile tests in the Pacific.

In a potential enemy's hands, Micronesia would be a strategic nightmare to U.S. defense planners. In World War II, the United States paid a huge price in lives and treasure to break through this island barrier to reach the Philippines and Okinawa and finally to defeat Japan. Clearly, these tiny dots of land are, indeed, "keys to the Pacific."

RECOGNITION OF the strategic importance of Micronesia was the basic reason for the creation of the United Nations Strategic Trusteeship, under U.S. administration, after World War II. That trust was, in effect, confirmation by all U.N. members of the military importance of these islands to the United States. This is the primary—indeed, the indispensable—value of the islands, not only to the United States but to the world and to the people of Micronesia themselves. Under the U.S. flag, the islands have a stabilizing value; they help to keep the peace. The phasing-down of the Vietnam war, the reduction of U.S. forces on the Asian mainland and in the western Pacific,

the impending reversion of Okinawa to Japanese civil administration, the possible future loss of Japanese and Philippine bases—all these factors have combined to emphasize once again the vital importance of Micronesia to U.S. security.

Will we retain the islands? Many in the military today are pessimistic. They feel that past neglect, and the resulting erosion of position in the islands, have gone too far; that, ultimately, psychological and political pressures will force us out (Russia, in fact, has repeatedly used the U.N. Trusteeship Council as a forum for attacks on U.S. "colonialism" in Micronesia.)

INDEED, the hour is late. But despite the neglect and mistakes of the past, there is still time for us to solve our problems in Micronesia. The Marianas group, tied to American Guam by kinship and proximity, want U.S. military installations. In fact, their peoples consider themselves more American than Micronesian. But such sentiment could change tomorrow if it is continued delay and uncertainty. And in much of the rest of Micronesia, particularly in the Palau group, pro-U.S. sentiment is far less evident.

One thing is clear, however: these beautiful islands, with their handful of inhabitants, are too small, too weak, too scattered to stand alone; their resources are inadequate—without external aid—to permit self-sufficiency in the modern world. They have only a fragile political unity and cohesiveness; the one common bond is the U.S. flag and the English language.

What is essential, in fairness to the people of Micronesia and in keeping with the future security of the United States, is a long-range plan that would entail both military development and encouragement of the local economy—fisheries and agriculture, marine biological research facilities, tourism. Political development as such as been too much emphasized; we have tried to impose a self-governing system, after the American model, upon disparate peoples, many of them used to the paternalistic autocracy of tribal chiefs. What is vital is better government, stronger leadership, and an influx of American capital—both private and government—to meet the growing challenge of Japanese economic penetration.

THOUSANDS OF Americans lost their lives in the Marshalls, the Palaus and the Marianas in World War II. Lest it happen again, these tropical pinpoints that guard the Pacific must remain under the American flag.

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Annex 11

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Micronesia's Status

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STAR-BULLETIN

The military case for America to retain possession of the islands of Micronesia is expertly presented in an adjoining article by Hanson Baldwin, the distinguished former military writer for the New York Times.

We reprint it in order to argue with it.

The well-stated argument made by Baldwin will reach millions of American readers through the Reader's Digest. It also parallels a good bit of past and present thinking in Washington and elsewhere. It could, if acted on, lead to a national policy on Micronesia that is both illogical and contrary to our ideals.

The Nixon Administration, fortunately, seems to be moving away from this line. It showed a lot more liberalism than this in its talks with Micronesian leaders at Hana, Maui, Oct. 4-12. The case for a liberal American policy needs public understanding and support.

* * *

Baldwin's arguments lead to the conclusion that the U.S. cannot risk an unfriendly presence in these islands, lest it someday have to fight some of the bloody battles of World War II--Kwajalein, Peleliu, Saipan--all over again.

Given this conclusion it becomes impossible for the U.S. to negotiate the future status of Micronesia on the basis of self-determination because the Micronesians might choose independence, which Baldwin holds is unacceptable.

Yet self-determination is a doctrine honored by both the United Nations and the United States. Before Hawaii could become a state, for example, its people had to vote affirmatively to accept the terms of the Statehood Act passed by Congress.

When the 100,000 Micronesians ask to be allowed to have the final say on their future status it would embarrass us to say "no"--yet the Baldwin reasoning tells us that we must, in our self-interest, and perhaps even in theirs if they dare to ask for independence.

We disagree.

Baldwin makes a point of the fact that their islands give us bases from which to monitor transpacific aircraft and communications, to track Soviet submarines, and to monitor both our missile tests and Russia's.

He calls them "keys to the Pacific" and speaks of the huge price in blood and treasure that it cost us to win them in World War II.

He seems to fail to look at the map.

Plenty of other "keys" that were obtained by great expenditure of blood and treasure in World War II no longer clear their political decisions with Washington. Why should Micronesia be different?

Iwo Jima has been returned to Japan. Okinawa will be soon.

The Philippines are independent.

Papua New Guinea, the site of Gen. MacArthur's staging

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bases at Port Moresby and Lae, will vote on independence next year.

Western New Guinea (West Irian), the site of the great World War II U.S. port and base at Hollandia, is a part of Indonesia.

Tarawa and Guadalcanal are British.

The Pacific also has a number of independent island nations—Fiji, Tonga, Western Samoa—presumably as open to unfriendly foreign suggestions as Micronesia would be.

The realities of the 1970's include these facts:

—In the missile age, another island-hopping war across the Pacific is hard to conceive.

—Even now we cannot bar ships of any nation from the Pacific. Russia sailed a surface fleet right past Adm. John J. McCain's Hawaii command headquarters last September.

—The real strategic value of Pacific islands to the U.S. is for listening and patrolling, as Baldwin suggests, but we can do this with a relatively few island bases and even do much of it from earth-orbiting satellites.

The few island bases that we need we have.

Hawaii, Midway, Wake, Johnston, Palmyra, Guam and American Samoa are firmly American.

Australia and New Zealand, for two, seem ready to give us whatever bases we need into the indefinite future.

For the near future, at least, we can continue to use bases in South Korea, Okinawa, Taiwan, the Philippines and (if we choose) Singapore.

There are six districts in Micronesia.

One of them, the Marianas, would like to become a permanent part of the U.S. and would welcome the reactivation of World War II bases on Saipan and Tinian.

Two others, the Palaus and the Marshalls, seem willing to negotiate agreements for U.S. defense operations to be based there, though the Palauans, in particular, may want to impose their own limits.

The Defense Department says it has no desire for bases in the other three districts—Yap, Truk and Ponape.

* * *
This survey of the situation leads to quite a different view than that suggested by Baldwin.

It suggests we can, without hazard to the U.S., negotiate fairly and openly with the Micronesians.

We can consider an unlimited range of possibilities, even their independence, if that is their final wish.

We are more likely to be long-term friends with them on this basis than if we coerce them.

In this negotiating frame, on the other hand, the Micronesians are more likely to look seriously at the advantages of staying with the U.S. than they are when they have no choice.

Five years ago, top Army officers said the return of Okinawa to Japan before the 1980's was inconceivable, yet now it has been agreed to.

We accept the fact of Russian ships sailing regularly in and out of Cuba, just off the U.S. Mainland. The fact that a few more may someday sail into Micronesia, thousands of miles from the U.S., cannot be anywhere near as threatening.