

Unsubstantiated

Back to Confusion

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

YANUCA ISLAND, Fiji—The strategic balance of the western and south-western Pacific has been significantly altered by U.S. military withdrawals taking place in Okinawa and South Vietnam and the political balance, if there really is one, may be changed by the new attitudes of recently elected socialist governments in Australia and New Zealand.

One result has been a rising military importance of the island chains that dot this enormous ocean area and another is a significant increase in nationalism among some of the thinly populated reefs and atolls that have not yet been awarded independence in this age of hapless ministates.

World Wars I and II put period to the German, Dutch and Japanese colonies in the region and the Portuguese presence is vestigial. But vast possessions are still administered by the United States, Britain, France and Australia despite the fact that many lands have received independence in recent years.

The twentieth century has seen a hodgepodge of solutions attempted to improve the well-being of Pacific peoples. The U.S.A. has granted statehood to Hawaii, made Guam a territory, awarded a peculiar governance to American Samoa, created possessions of Midway and Wake and accepted responsibility for Micronesia as a U.N. trust territory. The latter is the only such region in existence except for East New Guinea, administered by Australia.

There is nothing tidy about this mixed series of arrangements which have, in effect, imposed upon Americans imperial responsibilities unrecognized by most of them. But, after all, there is nothing tidy about the politics or history of the Pacific islands, including populations of Asian, Polynesian and Melanesian extraction with different cultures and traditions.

Nor do the remaining white supervisory powers agree on what their future should be. The French want to hang on to colonies like Tahiti where they conduct nuclear tests, and New Caledonia which has vast nickel deposits. The Australians would like to give ultimate freedom to Papua.

The British have already granted independence to Fiji, Tonga, and Nauru with its only 6,000 people. Britain also would like to free the Solomons and the Gilbert and Ellice Island, but this is easier said than done. New Zealand has relinquished West Samoa.

However, simply dumping hitherto dependent populations may in many instances condemn them to slow economic disaster. Often they have nei-

ther the resources or administrative or political experience to survive. And—especially in the U.S.A.—there is little disposition to withdraw from an important strategic area with the thought that potential adversaries might move into the resulting vacuum.

Washington undoubtedly feels that its missile, air and submarine bases and testing ranges are even more important now than was true before American withdrawals from Southeast Asia began or before Soviet Far Eastern strength, Chinese nuclear power and Japanese neo-nationalism started to assert themselves. U.S. concern has been expressed in Micronesia by sizable military expenditures.

Nevertheless, the tendency of Pacific peoples is to seek mastery over their own fate. This idea has certainly been accelerated by developments in recent years, including the installation of socialist regimes in Australia and New Zealand.

Yet it is extremely difficult to devise a coherent future for these islands. For the most part, they can become only international beggars if left to their own devices. Apart from tourist potential and actual value of military installations, few have valuable resources to develop.

Not even in American-governed Micronesia—covering an oceanic span equal to the entire United States—is there unity of aspiration. The Mariana Islands want closer union with Washington but the five other administrative districts want either looser association or total independence. Washington for its part still seems agreeable to a formula that would accept local autonomy so long as foreign and defense policy could be run by the U.S.A.

Quite clearly this approach is consonant with American hopes regarding the future of other Pacific territories. Washington appears content to see Britain and France either grant independence to their colonies in these waters or to withhold it—so long as a common Western strategic unity applies.

There is no over-all policy logic in view because in Micronesia alone, to whose key atoll positions the United States is slowly falling back from Asia, the attitudes hitherto applied perforce have been dominated by contradictions as more and more nationalist voices are heard. The last thing Washington wishes to see is development of such confusion into over-all Pacific chaos.