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Pacific League Of Nations?

A single generation ago, in the Western Pacific, and the South Pacific, there were only the flags of the U.S., Britain, France, the Netherlands, Australia and New Zealand to content with. The Pacific was dominated, as was Africa, by European nations, or the U.S.

Japan had been defeated in a major war. Many of the islands were devastated by the war. Their economies, such as they were, were ruined. Ahead lie confusion and a time of benevolent aid from the great nations. No clear pattern of what lay ahead for the islands had yet emerged, but after hundreds of years of foreign dominance in the area it seemed logical to assume that it would always be that way.

Not so. The winds of change came rapidly in the area of independence, with Indonesia breaking away from the Dutch, and with the Philippines taking their promised independence from the United States.

Suddenly, colonialism became a dirty word. Many of the larger nations, such as Great Britain, suffering from the aftermath of a cruel and expensive war decided to pull in its horns, and gave out independence or a partnership arrangement, loosely called commonwealth, to its former colonies— with a few notable exceptions, such as Hong Kong.

Now, nearly 30 years after the end of the war definite patterns are emerging, and these patterns should be known, and exposed to the people of Guam, who still have not resolved their own political status. Besides Indonesia, and the Asian rim countries, there have been four island groups that have obtained independence of one kind or another. They are Tonga, which always was more or less independent, Fiji, Western Samoa, and Nauru. Each is different from the others, and each is having their own particular problems.

There are some rumblings for other independent movements—in our own Trust Territory, for instance. Certainly, Australia made it clear to Papua-New Guinea that it is going to release that huge island from colonial status, probably within the next year or two. Tahiti has an active independence movement, although the French don't seem to be very interested. The Solomons are talking about breaking away from New Guinea. New Caledonia, and the New Hebrides seem fairly calm right now. Some of the smaller islands, the Cooks, Norfolk, Ellice, the Gilberts, American Samoa, have varying degrees of dependence upon the U.S. or New Zealand, or Australia, and it may be many years before this will change.

The sad part of it all is that some of the island groups are so small, and so sparsely populated they will never become economically viable—at least in the Western sense. And without that economic viability, there can't really be independence in the true sense.

Take a country like Nauru, though, to illustrate what we mean. They are completely independent—because with their tremendous export of phosphate they can afford to be. With only 5,000 people, they have their own shipping line, and airline.

Fiji is another nation that has grown up, and with 500,000 people, it already holds a commanding position in South Pacific affairs. The island chain is a natural crossroads, shipping and air, for the entire South Pacific. Its tourism income this year should surpass \$30 million. Prime Minister Ratu Mara of Fiji hopes to see a community of Pacific island states which will help break down the old colonial patterns and give the island peoples a stronger political and economic position in the international arena. He envisions Fiji as the trade, cultural and communications center for a vast Pacific territory stretching from the atolls of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands to Papua-New Guinea—a region larger than the continent of Australia but with a population of less than six million.

It seems to us that Fiji might be on the right track. Two facts are obvious. First, the islands in the Pacific are trying more and more to shed themselves of the colonialism of the past, trying to gain more and more autonomy. Second, it appears that with a few exceptions, few of them have the economic resources to do much on their own in this world arena that Fiji talks about.

An obvious solution comes to the surface. Why not have a federation of Pacific States that could be responsive to the needs of all of the islanders?

The answer to that is that we already have such a group, but unfortunately, it is so loosely conceived, and loosely tied together, with a miniscule budget, that few people realize what they are up to, and that Guam is a part of it. We're talking about the South Pacific Conference. Ask any American, any Australian, any Japanese, any New Zealander about the South Pacific Conference—and the odds are he'll say "What's that?" Even in the Pacific Basin countries, there's little or nothing known about the annual meeting of delegates from Pacific island territories. In fact, Guam has shown so little interest in it, we didn't even send a delegate to the Noumea-based South Pacific Commission's annual Conference. It was set up in 1947 by England, the United States, France, Australia, The Netherlands and New Zealand. Its purpose was to help the rapidly emerging territories of the Pacific to cope with the Pandora's box of problems that increasing contact with Western civilization let loose on them. Its secretariat of economists, educators, and medical men was to provide advice and help to any Pacific territory that asked for it. But it was to be no busybody—assistance would only be given on request.

The South Pacific Commission exemplifies international co-operation on a small scale. The enormous area it covers combined with its small budget has kept the Commission voiceless and powerless largely. Yet, some good things have been accomplished. They have studied the infestation and control of the devastating coconut beetle; they've conducted research into fishing beyond the lagoons; they've studied the need for a common language; and the conservation of island cultures by such means as the immensely successful South Pacific Arts Festival; they've looked into birth control, and rat control in the islands, and have launched a continuing fight against disease in man and nature.

There is no easy answer, of course, to the ills and problems of all of the islands, largely because of their varying sizes, and cultures. But it seems to us as we proceed towards more and more autonomy from our ties with the U.S., France, and Britain it may be that the South Pacific Commission will have to be looked at anew, as a possible catalyst for political and economic achievements. It seems apparent that few of the island chains will be able to do it on their own. Some other solution must be sought eventually. JCM.