
End Not Yet In Sight...

We're inclined to disagree with Rep. Patsy T. Mink, D-Hawaii, who concluded a session on Status Talks for Micronesia, before the House Interior Subcommittee, with some praise for Ambassador Franklin Haydn Williams. She said "Instead of being far from completion of your work, indeed you are now extremely close."

Unfortunately, Mrs. Mink was ill during the last subcommittee visit to the Trust Territory, or she would have found that she didn't exactly hit the nail on the head with her remark.

From all we have been able to gather, from Ambassador Williams' remarks to the committee, to the Status Talks themselves, to the ramblings of the Congress of Micronesia, to others we've talked to during the past years, the completion of Williams' work is not "extremely close" at all. We're sure that she just used the expression naively, as an expression of interest to Williams. But the facts show quite otherwise. Frankly, after watching the Micronesian scene for many years, we can't see any clear trend developing. We are inclined to agree more with Williams, who said: "It is not easy to determine what the people of Micronesia really want." He noted that "There are wide differences of opinion on the future political status question within Micronesia." And that's the truth.

The range of opinions on what is next for Micronesia is from the wild-eyed student demonstrators, many from Palau, who insist that Micronesia should be completely independent, and refuse to consider military bases for their islands to a moderate such as Nick Bossy, of Truk, a leader of the anti-independence movement who was interviewed recently by the Daily News.

Bossy said that 98 per cent of Truk's 30,000 people reject the idea of complete independence. He questioned whether the elected leaders of the Congress of Micronesia are really representing the people. But both Bossy and Ambassador Williams had one point in common. He said: "We've been disappointed in our government for not educating us politically. It's very important that we stop this independence movement until the Trukese people understand the advantages and disadvantages of the other possibilities open to us—free association and commonwealth." Bossy termed the independence movement in Truk "not very strong" although Truk's COM delegation has declared it the wish of the people.

Not only are the various options open to the Micronesian people difficult to present some serious problems before they're resolved, but even the means of making the people understand those options are going to be difficult. Williams noted that no one has come up with an accurate way of measuring public opinion in the territory. "I'm going to have to confess that from what I've been told, a very large segment of opinion in Micronesia doesn't know very much about the issue." There haven't been any straw votes, or surveys taken on the matter. Nor is there any plans for any that we know about.

While we respect Congressman Philip Burton, who suggested that the subcommittee make another trip to Micronesia to try to ascertain the views of the people, we can only caution him on this. We've been making trips to the islands for seven years, and we still are having difficulties trying to determine how the majority feels. Generally, we do know what the leaders think, because they are articulate, and in a position to be heard.

Micronesians are confused for a variety of reasons. First, there is so many factors involved in any kind of decision. There is the Congress of Micronesia, the Status Commission, the American Administration, the U.S. Congress, the military, the Department of State, the United Nations, the Peace Corps, the Marianas separatist movement, and even Guam, and other neighboring countries to consider.

Secondly, because of language barriers, and because of the tremendous distances involved, and the lack of good communications in the islands, just getting the message to the people is a challenge. Some of the outer islands, for instance, may only see a field ship a couple of times a year. They don't have radios in all areas, and certainly not TV, or daily newspapers. Even if they had the newspapers, they probably wouldn't be able to read them in the remote areas.

We feel that perhaps the Status Commission is going at this thing in the wrong way. Rather than have the Commission solely responsible for making "a deal" of some kind with the United States, we think that it might be better if they worked out a series of options to present to the people.

In other words, we feel that the Status Commission should spend the next year or so examining all possible forms of governmental status for the future. They should explore Status Quo, Free Association, Commonwealth, Territorial Status, and of course, Independence. Perhaps they might always want to consider some sort of alignment with another country, say Japan. After the options are listed, A,B,C,D, etc. then material can be prepared on each possible choice, to explain the various programs to the people. Teams could be formed and sent to each of the islands for personal contacts with all of the people. Seminars could be held. Such informational programs would probably take a year or two to get to all of the people. Then, and only then, would the people be sampled for their opinions and desires, either through a full fledged vote, supervised by the U.N., or through some type of survey.

We're not picking on, or downgrading the Status Commission in any way. They have demonstrated their ability in the past years, and have acted intelligently in trying to pursue some very difficult negotiations with the United States. It just seems to us, though, that judging from the obvious differences of opinion, it might be better to gather information about different choices of government, present this information to the people of Micronesia, and allow them to make their own choice. JCM.

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