

Editorial

"Buying A Colony?"

The headline in the prestigious newspaper, the Manchester (England) Guardian was clear and concise—and just a bit opinionated. It said: "US buys itself a Pacific colony." The article, complete with a map of the western Pacific, was written by Guardian writer Martin Woollacott in Hong Kong.

Is this true? Is the U.S. in fact buy a Pacific colony? While the jury is still out, we must admit that from the British or French standpoint, writer Woollacott certainly has a point. Let's take a look at what he is saying:

"The Pacific, among whose thousands of islands are most of France's and Britain's remaining dependencies, has long been one of the last refuges of colonialism. But it is still a curious fact that two centuries after the destructive process of Western occupation of the islands began the United States is now preparing to cut itself a final slice of the Pacific pie. The slice in question consists of the Marianas, a chain of 14 small islands north of Guam in the Southwest Pacific. The Marianas are one of several island groups which make up the U.S. Trust Territory of Micronesia, which the U.S. has administered since it took the islands from the Japanese during the Second World War."

Woollacott says that the terms of the trusteeship charged the U.S. with the responsibility of advancing the entire territory towards self-government, but said that the "solution" now emerging is that the Marianas will be permanently associated with the U.S. as a "commonwealth," a status similar to that of Puerto Rico.

Writer Woollacott makes the point that: "There is little doubt that most of the 14,000 inhabitants of the Marianas want a deal of this kind, since it would guarantee them living standards otherwise unattainable, even though it amounts to cultural suicide." That is a fascinating concept. We agree that most of the inhabitants of the Marianas will vote for the commonwealth. In a recent visit to Saipan we found that as many as 90 percent of the people there favored the move, or at least those were the percentages quoted us. Cultural suicide is another thing. We suspect that the millions of Pilgrims, Quakers, Scotch, Irish, Welch, French, German, Poles, Italians, etc. who emigrated to the U.S. also committed "cultural suicide," knowing that they were leaving one culture behind to join another. They did so for two reasons, and we believe that these reasons still apply. One, the U.S. has a unique political system that allows the utmost in personal freedom in such areas as choice of places to live, choice of jobs, freedom of press and speech; and two, because the United States, for all its problems, still has the world's highest standard of living, and the greatest economic opportunity.

The cultural suicide aspect might be explored even further. Actually, the culture of the people of the Marianas has already been corrupted to the point of being practically unrecognizable after more than 450 years of European and Asian domination. The Marianas have been run by the Spanish, the Germans, the Japanese and the Americans. In most instances, nobody can blame the demise of native culture on the Americans, because it was long gone before the Americans ever arrived. The inhabitants of the Marianas will still retain their own language to varying degrees, their own food habits, and likely, some of their family traditions. But even these language, food, and traditions are a montage of Spanish, Japanese, Filipino, German, and American.

Woollacott also says that: "In the case of the Marianas, the value is strategic. Guam, geographically part of the Marianas although culturally more akin to the Philippines and a U.S. possession since the conquest of those islands from Spain, is already developed as a major base. The Guam strategy in a negative sense demands that none of the island group north of it should pass into hostile hands, and the best way of preventing this is a continue to hold the entire group."

He cites the inherent problems of maintaining military bases in other countries, which makes island bases attractive. He says further that the people of Micronesia as a whole might reasonably regard the strategic value of the Marianas as an asset for which a rent is due to all and not just to the "lucky" 14,000 who happen to live there.

Woollacott concludes that: "It is curious that the U.S. as opposed as the rest of us to the myth of the so-called overseas territory when practised by the Portuguese or the French should follow a policy not so different in its own affairs."

True, that does pose a dilemma, one that may not be resolved that easily in the U.S. Congress, and by the U.S. people. This is the sort of things groups like the Friends of Micronesia are saying: How can the U.S. talk about freedoms in other countries, particularly Portugal, or the Soviet Union, when it is, itself, embarking on a program to tie up a tiny group of islands into a nebulous allegiance? Yet, the people of the Marianas are not stupid. They obviously prefer the American way of life over other past rulers, the Spanish, or the Japanese. And yes, they'll come out of it looking pretty good financially—and that can't be all bad. Each of us, on Guam, or Malta, or Hong Kong, or Argentina are all seeking to uplift ourselves financially. The people of the Marianas seem to have found a way that wouldn't entail pollution of their islands with refineries, or steel processing plants.

Frankly, we've never been too worried over the British writers who point at the U.S. "colonialism" with sneers and alarm, after looking at Hong Kong, where the four million Chinese have absolutely no voice in their government. That is an economic colony, pure and simple. At least the people of the Marianas, when the Commonwealth is established, will have almost complete autonomy. They will, in fact, write their own constitution. Mr. Woollacott doesn't suggest the Chinese in Hong Kong do that. JCM.