

THE POLITICAL EVOLUTION OF MICRONESIA TOWARD SELF DETERMINATION

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THE CHANGING WORLD COLONIAL PATTERN HAS FINALLY CAUGHT UP with the United States and its trusteeship in Micronesia. Controlling one of the last three United Nations trusteeships,¹ it is face to face with a plebiscite to take place among the people of Micronesia sometime during this decade in which they will decide their political future. The dwindling number of trust areas has caused world attention to focus on America's presence in Micronesia. Thus, the United States now finds itself in the same position, and with many of the same problems of colonialism in a changing world, as did France and England only a few years ago.

Geography

Micronesia,² or the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, is located in the western Pacific north of the equator. Its vastness is difficult to comprehend for those who have never been there. Covering an area of approximately 3,000,000 square miles, equivalent in size to the Continental United States, it would stretch from Nashville, Tennessee, to San Diego, California. Its area extends through four time zones, approaching Japan and Hawaii on its northern and eastern reaches and abutting New Guinea on the south and the Philippines on the west. The vastness of the territory is deceptive because there is so much water and so little land. The three major archipelagos which comprise Micronesia, the Marshall, Caroline, and Mariana Islands,³ are scattered throughout this area and consist of approximately 2,100 islands with a combined land area of only 700-odd square miles.⁴ The great distances between island and cultural groups have had a tendency in the past to engender ethnocentrism among the people of Micronesia. While geography has not been kind to the political development of the territory, military historians of the 20th century have been aware of the incredible

¹ The other two are New Guinea, administered by Australia and headed for independence this year, and Southwest Africa, which the United Nations still considers a trust territory, although the administering authority, the Republic of South Africa, does not.

² Micronesia described herein is a political unit and does not encompass the total ethnic and geographical description, which covers a much larger area.

³ Excluding Guam, which is an unincorporated territory of the United States.

⁴ It is smaller than the state of Rhode Island and 1/25th the size of Connecticut.

strategic location that places the islands within striking distance of almost every point in Asia and the Pacific.

Political History

History, as well as geography, has not fostered the development of a Micronesian political entity. Although past history has witnessed the domination of Micronesia by Spanish, German, and Japanese regimes, politically the islands are far apart and do not even look like a harmonious whole.

Spain, which dominated the islands for three centuries, brought the Micronesians little except Christianity. Germany challenged the Spanish regime in the 1880's, and as a result of the Spanish-American War in 1899 bought Spain's interest in Micronesia for \$4,500,000.⁵ The Germans were in Micronesia only a short time and concentrated on making their tropical paradise show a profit, thus encouraging the production of copra. The German administration of Micronesia ended abruptly with World War I when the Japanese seized the islands. By a secret agreement in 1917, the allies recognized Japan's claims to all former German possessions in the Pacific north of the equator.⁶ The United States, adhering to Woodrow Wilson's ideal of self-determination⁷ and aware that the Japanese had virtually annexed the islands, attempted to circumvent them by creating the mandate system at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. American efforts were rewarded when a special category of Class C Mandates were created to cover the case. Japan, as the administering authority for the League of Nations in Micronesia, was responsible for submitting reports and looking after the social and economic well-being of the indigenous population, permitting freedom of worship and missionary activity. Under the mandate, however, Japan was prohibited from building fortifications and military bases in the islands.⁸ On these terms, Japan was confirmed as the administering authority in 1920, with the United States accepting this arrangement in a special agreement in 1922.⁹

The islands were governed after the first year of naval rule by the South Seas Administration (Nanyo-Cho), with the seat of government in Koror, Palau. Laws for the mandate were made by Imperial Ordinances and Governor's Orders. The majority of the civilian administrators were Japanese from the home islands, but on the local level administration was

⁵ Excluding Guam, which was seized by the United States in 1898.

⁶ W. G. Beasley, *The Modern History of Japan* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1963), p. 206.

⁷ Wilson stressed the desirability of consulting the wishes of the minority groups involved in the prospective settlements.

⁸ John S. Bassett, *The League of Nations* (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1922), p. 56.

⁹ Raymond L. Buell, *The Washington Conference* (New York: Appleton and Company, 1928), p. 26.

through village chiefs and headmen. While this was indirect rule by the Japanese, actually little autonomy was left to the indigenous leaders.¹⁰ The Japanese ignored the prohibition on the establishment of military bases, and rumors that they were turning the islands into fortresses were confirmed in December 1941 when from bases in the Marshalls and Eastern Carolines the assault on Pearl Harbor was launched.

Over a quarter of a century ago, the islands of Micronesia were almost daily topics of discussion for millions of Americans. Names like Kwajalein, Eniwetok, Peleliu, and Saipan were household words that brought vivid memories of loved ones killed or wounded in desperate battles for control of those far away places. Wrested from the Japanese at a high cost of men and material, the United States had no definite policy regarding the future political status of the islands. At the end of World War II, the Japanese administration was superseded by American military government under the Department of the Navy, which administered the area on an interim basis until July 1, 1951, when the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands was transferred to the jurisdiction of the Office of Territories in the Department of the Interior.¹¹

The Road to Trusteeship

While the United States had no definite plans regarding the future political status of the ex-Japanese mandate, a little publicized view was that it also had no intention of surrendering its control of Micronesia. Political opinion throughout the nation a quarter of a century ago was sharply divided over the political future of the islands. Two alternatives held the spotlight: The military argued for outright annexation of Micronesia because of its strategic location,¹² while the State Department favored trusteeship under the newly formed United Nations. Raging arguments took place between civilian and military representatives resulting in accusations by Secretary of State James F. Byrnes that the military was hindering civilian efforts that would place the Pacific Islands under trusteeship.

President Truman, aware of the difficulties between the followers of Secretary of State Byrnes and Secretary of the Navy Forrestal, favored a compromise that would protect American strategic interests in the islands. This was done by classifying the islands as "strategic" and under the aegis of the United Nations Security Council, rather than the General Assembly,

¹⁰ Tadao Yanaihara, *Pacific Islands Under Japanese Mandate* (London, England: Oxford University Press, 1940), pp. 259-260.

¹¹ Dorothy Richard, *United States Naval Administration of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands*, Vol. III (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1957), p. 1099.

¹² Revelation of the Yalta Agreement in 1946, awarding Southern Sakhalin and the Kuriles to the Soviet Union, resulted in demands by U.S. military leaders and Congressmen for annexation of the Pacific Islands.

thus removing the fear that United States strategic interests would be threatened by a Soviet veto.¹³

President Truman then announced in 1946 that the United States was prepared to place under United Nations trusteeship the former Japanese mandated islands.¹⁴

Trusteeship Agreement

The agreement finally approved by the United Nations Security Council and the United States Congress in 1947 was a unique document under which the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, as a political entity, was designated a "strategic trust," thus making a sharp distinction between a strategic and nonstrategic trust. Two important differences stand out between these categories: (1) The administering authority of a strategic territory is subject to ultimate Security Council supervision rather than to General Assembly supervision, as would be the case for a nonstrategic territory;¹⁵ and (2) the United States as administering authority can declare all or part of the territory a "closed area," thus forbidding access to anyone, including representatives of the United Nations, and also decide whether or not within the closed area it will apply the basic objectives of trusteeship. Within the closed area it also can maintain military forces and build bases not subject to inspection by any other nation.¹⁶

In discharging its obligations under the trust agreement, the United States in the realm of political development is to:

Foster the development of such political institutions as are suited to the Trust Territory and promote the development of the inhabitants of the Trust Territory toward self-government or independence as may be appropriate to the particular circumstances of the Trust Territory and its people and the freely expressed wishes of the people concerned; and to this end . . . give to the inhabitants of the Trust Territory a progressively increasing share in the administrative services in the Territory; develop their participation in government; give due recognition to the customs of the inhabitants in providing a system of law for the territory . . .¹⁷

The preceding section of Article Six of the Trusteeship Agreement spells out the basic foundation for American political action, and this is what America has been attempting in the realm of political development for the past quarter of a century.

¹³ The United States insisted the islands be designated as a strategic trust in which it could develop military bases, and which Summer Wells at the time deemed "a vicious precedent."

¹⁴ Richard, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-11.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁶ James N. Murray, Jr., *The United Nations Trusteeship System* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1957), pp. 73-77.

¹⁷ Article Six, *Trusteeship Agreement for the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands* (New York: United Nations, 1947), p. 3.

From the inception of the trust agreement to the present, Micronesia has been treated as a poor relative of the United States and never given a realistic budget with which to build a viable economy. This lack of funds is traceable to the United States Congress, which placed a ceiling on the budget of the territory, and to the thinking of the high commissioner of the territory from 1955 to 1961. During this time, Congress put a limit of \$7.5 million on the expenditures of the Trust Territory.¹⁸ It was the high commissioner's view that the \$7.5 million authorized by Congress each year of his administration was sufficient to provide minimal basic services to people who were largely on a subsistence economy. He believed that additional funds beyond the capacity of the island economy to absorb them would only be harmful.¹⁹ In 1962, however, enactment of Public Law 87-541 increased the Federal appropriations for fiscal year 1963 to \$15 million and to \$17.5 million thereafter.²⁰ Thus, beginning in the early 1960's, the budget for the territory began to rise, and this past year reached approximately \$60 million. Previously not included in American foreign or domestic aid programs, the islands now participate in numerous Federal programs, particularly in the field of education.²¹

However, over the years the Departments of Interior, Defense, and State have bickered over their conflicting interests in the islands. Having no constituency, Micronesia became a backwash of American interest as each Secretary had more important matters to attend to, and, consequently, no agreed-upon policy with respect to the future of the islands was forthcoming. Rising political pressure from the Micronesians themselves within the past few years has finally forced the United States to start thinking clearly about such a policy as we shape our future political relations with these people.

The Congress of Micronesia

Among the most notable achievements of the United States in the Trust Territory has been the creation of a Micronesian Congress and of legislatures in each of the districts.²² This political advancement began twenty-five years ago with the initial fostering of the development of self-governing municipalities and local government units in the districts. The next significant political achievement was the creation of an inter-district

¹⁸ United States Department of State, *Eleventh Annual Report to the United Nations on the Administration of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1959), p. 46.

¹⁹ Statement by J. L. Taylor, territorial consultant to House Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, personal interview.

²⁰ United States Congress, *Congressional Record—Senate*, June 15, 1966, Vol. 13, No. 102 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1966), p. 12534.

²¹ Two of these are the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Pacific Law 89-10, and the Library Services and Construction Act, Public Law 89-511.

²² The six administrative districts of the territory are the Marshall Islands; the Mariana Islands, excluding Guam; Ponape; Truk; Yap; and Palau.

committee to advise the high commissioner in 1956. Delegates, representing all of the districts were chosen by district congresses. This was a major step in promoting territory-wide consciousness, but being only an advisory body, its influence in shaping Trust Territory policy through its various sub-committees is difficult to estimate at this time. In 1961, the inter-district committee recommended that it be changed to the Council of Micronesia.

In 1965, one of the most notable events in the area of self-government and political development occurred in Micronesia. As a result of the promulgation of Order No. 2882 by the Secretary of the Interior in 1964, the formal transfer of legislative authority from the high commissioner to the newly established Congress of Micronesia took place. For the first time in nearly four hundred years an elected group of Micronesians was to shape the destiny of their island paradise. However, although the Micronesians have gained control over the legislative branch of their government, they still feel castrated politically since their actions are subject to veto by the high commissioner.²³ The Congress of Micronesia, consisting of a bicameral legislature of twelve senators (two from each district) and twenty-one members of the house, thus feel that their legislative powers are circumscribed. As a result, the last five years have seen growing demands by the Congressmen for greater responsibilities and an end to this veto power.

Future Political Status

Now, twenty-three years after the signing of the trusteeship agreement between the United States and the United Nations, things are beginning to change politically. The Micronesians themselves are in the forefront of this change. They feel it is about time to assume control of their own destiny, time to redefine their status with the United States, and time to seek an end to the present trusteeship agreement. But the question of what should take its place is now being debated throughout the islands.

In order to assure themselves that their future destiny is decided by Micronesians rather than by Washington, the elected representatives to the Congress of Micronesia established a political status commission in 1967.²⁴ This group of very capable men, after extensive travel to all parts of the Pacific and to American territories in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, issued in 1969 a commendable report discussing the manageable alternatives available to the Micronesians in deciding their future. The political status commission recommended that the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands become a self-governing state in free association with the United States. This first recommendation recognized two inescapable realities, "... the need

²³ The present high commissioner is Edward E. Johnson, a businessman from Hawaii, appointed by the Secretary of the Interior in 1969. Johnson recently stated that he might be the last American high commissioner.

²⁴ Congress of Micronesia, *Future Political Status Commission Report* (Saipan, Mariana Islands: Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, 1969), p. 2.

for Micronesian self-government and the fact of long-standing American interest in this area.”²⁵ The commission pointed out that they chose this free-state status because continuation of a quasi-colonial status would prove degrading to Micronesia and unworthy of the United States. The commission felt it was time the Micronesians themselves assumed responsibility for administering the islands. Aware of the unique historical partnership which has been forged between the Pacific Islands and American over the past years, they seek “. . . not an end but redefinition, renewal, and improvement of this partnership.”²⁶ Aware also that the United States has given to the islands the gift of what it cherishes most, the idea of democratic, representative, constitutional government, they desire continued association between the two peoples. However, this partnership is joined with the wish that the Micronesians maintain their identity and create a “Micronesian State.”

Free association would mean that the Micronesians would have internal self-government but would look to the United States for representation and protection in international affairs. Micronesia would also continue to look for material and human assistance in affairs of the government and in development of the islands in times of crises and day-to-day operations.

While the political status commission turned down independence as unrealistic as a first alternative, it recommended that if the negotiations that are currently going on between itself and the United States should fail, the only alternative would be independence. This second alternative, however, is fraught with economic and administrative difficulties.

While these two choices have been recommended by the political status commission, they have caused some misunderstanding among the Micronesian people, who do not realize that these are only recommendations and that other alternatives are available. For example, integration with the United States would have the corresponding advantages of obtaining American citizenship, a higher standard of living, and United States responsibility for the well-being of Micronesia. Disadvantages would include American citizens acquiring equal rights to land ownership, possible loss of Micronesian control over their own affairs, and intensified Americanization which would no doubt diminish Micronesian cultures. Lazarus Salii, chairman of the political status commission, recently supported a United Nations report that warned that further Americanization will destroy the island cultures.

Another alternative the Micronesians could consider is integration with Japan. Micronesians over forty-five fondly remember the “good old days” under the Japanese, when economically they were better off than at present. The status commission, aware of America’s strategic interest in the islands,

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

feels this might be an unrealistic alternative since the United States could be expected to veto such a decision.

Before any of these alternatives are to be selected by the people in a plebiscite, the commission recommended that an intensive political education program be conducted throughout the islands.

Just this past summer, President Nixon offered Micronesia commonwealth status, but the political status commission found this totally unacceptable, and it appears the two sides have arrived at an impasse. The conflict centers around the unique status sought by Micronesia. The United States seems reluctant to offer a uniquely different status, but rather prefers a relationship similar to that of Guam or Puerto Rico. The Micronesians, on the other hand, favor only free association, which is a novel and completely different concept. They also want to be able to terminate the pact at any time, agreeable to only one of the two signing parties.²⁷ At this time, the United States seems to find this position totally unacceptable and not related to the very real American concerns and practical limitations.

Micronesia will not decide its future alone. Any change in political status must be made with the approval of the United States Congress and the United Nations. The Micronesians deserve our best, and after two decades of administering the islands, we are finally waking up to our special legal and moral obligations to them. For our own selfish reasons, many Americans hope that they will freely elect to continue their association with the United States. If the present negotiations fail, the future for both the United States and Micronesia is uncertain. For America, it may mean a diminishing influence, as well as a threat to her continued presence, in this very strategic area of the world. For the Micronesians, it may mean the birth of a new nation.

²⁷ *Ibid.*