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LESSONS LEARNED: The Micronesian Quest for Independence in the Context of American Imperial History

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In the course of their efforts to bring an end to US trusteeship over their islands, Micronesian leaders looked to American colonial history for the lessons it might provide them. This article draws upon both contemporaneous documentary sources and more recent interviews with the leaders who negotiated with the US, describing and analyzing the specific historical cases and patterns upon which the Micronesians drew, and focuses in particular upon the land and land rights problems experienced by native Hawaiians and American Indians. The Micronesians' insistence upon full autonomy and sovereignty was grounded in their understandings of these historical lessons.

To anyone studying them closely, the Micronesians' negotiations to end American trusteeship over their islands seemed at the time to proceed agonizingly slowly. The process began in 1965 with the founding of the Congress of Micronesia and the convening of its committee on future political status. The beginnings of a respectable degree of self-government came with the establishment of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Republic of the Marshalls, and Republic of Belau governments in 1978, and autonomy can be dated to the implementation of the compacts of Free Association with the US in 1986.¹ The United Nations Security Council voted to terminate the trusteeship agreement in 1990 and the General Assembly welcomed the FSM and the Marshalls as members in 1991; the Micronesian governments have dated their status as independent nation-states to that time.² When we consider still festering political status ques-

tions in, for example, Puerto Rico and Guam, or the 60 years Hawaii remained a territory, the extraordinary fact that most Micronesians achieved independence, rather than closer political integration into the US, is matched by the speed with which it was accomplished. There are several reasons for this, perhaps the single most important being United Nations oversight. Another element of enormous significance, however, was the Micronesians' own consciousness not only of what sorts of political relationships with the US they would find acceptable, but of what arrangements they found unacceptable. This awareness of what they would not countenance rested in part upon their own indigenous notions of what constitutes good government, but also in good measure upon their grasp of American history in general and the history of American expansion in particular. In this article I first analyze relevant elements of that history, then report

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and discuss Micronesian leaders' recollections about the lessons they learned from it.

The Micronesian leaders who negotiated with the US had all experienced the ravages visited upon their islands by World War Two, as the Japanese resisted the American drive through the Micronesian islands, which lay along the key routes both to the Japanese homeland and to the reconquest of the Philippines. The great majority of them, moreover, shared common elements of an American education. But as peoples who had been subjected to the vagaries of four different colonial regimes within the course of 50 years, their interpretations of American history differed significantly from those responsible for providing them that education. While most Americans have great difficulty perceiving their country as a colonizing power, or themselves as colonialists, this perspective is not so alien to those whom Americans have deprived of their lands or of sovereignty over their lands.

In particular, this essay seeks to preserve Micronesians' perspectives on the relevance of American history as they struggled to regain a real and substantial measure of autonomy over their homelands. After decades of research in Micronesia, I began working in Puerto Rico, in an effort to compare its political status processes with those of Micronesia. In 1996 I returned once more to the FSM and interviewed many of the surviving leaders who had negotiated the Compact of Free Association with the US, and worked my way systematically through the FSM archives, studying the records of the political status process. My research in Puerto Rico persuaded me that the Micronesians' achievement of independence had been relatively expeditious. I was also convinced that many Micronesians understood that in other American territories the longer the peoples have been under American rule, the more difficult it has become for them to choose to end it. Although I found that this awareness did indeed play a role in Micronesians' outlooks, I also discovered that a far more significant factor was their leaders' common experience as students in Hawaii, where they saw first-hand what had happened to Pacific islanders who lost their lands to

Americans. That experience, coupled with knowledge of American territorial expansion and the decolonization efforts of other Pacific islands, convinced them that their best hope for survival as a people lay in establishing a firm but distant relationship with the US.

Ivan Musicant's *Empire by Default*, a centennial account of the Spanish-American War, describes "an American empire, acquired almost by default" (1998:655). Only his lack of historical reflection allows Musicant to claim that this episode demonstrates a sudden awakening of America's interest in world affairs and "an acceptance of America's newfound overseas responsibilities" (1998:34). Likewise, he is fundamentally wrong when he refers to the United States' "attempt to construct an empire, but one that differed from the colonial chattels of the European powers—an altruistic export of American politics, ideals, and morality" (1998:656). More to the point, in *The Edge of Paradise*, an account of "America in Micronesia," P.F. Kluge speaks of "America's accidental presence in Pacific" (1991:234). In point of fact, the US had been engaged in empire building from the earliest days of the republic and both its practices and its rhetoric largely matched, and often exceeded, that of the European imperial powers. To suggest otherwise is to deny the reasons for the struggles of those who have sought—some successfully, some not yet so happily—to put an end to American rule over their lands.

AMERICAN MOVEMENT TOWARD THE PACIFIC AND MICRONESIA

American interests in the Pacific long precede World War Two and the Cold War, and the shift in major-power tensions that has followed in the wake of the Cold War's demise should not be expected to markedly alter those interests. Throughout the nineteenth century, Americans actively cultivated ties in Micronesia, particularly in the Marshalls and Eastern Carolines. Whalers and missionaries came first; later the quest for guano would draw the attention of both American commerce and government. This latter episode had a significant but largely forgotten impact on American interests in the area. In March 1859 a letter ap-

peared in the New York *Daily Tribune* listing 48 islands claimed by American companies and individuals; for years afterward this list was cited as an authority for American possessions in the area. In an 1859 article in the German geographical journal *Petermann's Mittheilungen*, two new maps of the Pacific demarcated various zones of sovereignty, including a large area entitled "Amerikanisches Polynesien," covering much of that part of Micronesia now known as Kiribati (the Gilbert Islands), with a legend reading in part, "i.e., von den Vereinigten Staaten beanspruchte..." (Stommel 1984:44-48).³

The US had in fact been driving toward the Pacific and China trade since at least Jefferson's presidency; access to the western coast of North America and ports directly opposite China had certainly factored into his rationale for engineering the Louisiana Purchase. The war with Mexico was likewise prosecuted with a view to securing California. With naval outposts in Samoa (basing rights there date from 1878) and Hawaii (1887), the US government was cautiously expanding in the same direction as the country's commercial and religious sectors. Despite considerable American interest in Micronesia, however, the forces of attraction were not yet strong enough to draw the government decisively into what remained for the time being autonomous territory and would later in the century become a European bailiwick.

Expansionism has been as fundamental to American political culture as democracy; indeed, Jeffersonian democracy was organized around what was known at the time as the "Empire for Liberty," that is, the proposition that equality and freedom could only be guaranteed to all Americans as long as there was ample territory into which to expand (LaFeber 1994:60; Tucker and Hendrickson 1990). This movement was by no means directed exclusively toward the west, however. After annexing the Floridas, American leaders frequently contemplated taking Cuba and others of the Antilles, there was considerable agitation for the absorption of all of Mexico, and Central America was eyed as well. To call upon but two important examples of expansionist propaganda from the close of the nineteenth century,

we may consider the writings of Frederick Jackson Turner and Alfred Thayer Mahan, among the most influential American historians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and foremost apostles of expansion. Turner's celebrated "frontier thesis" (1893) exalted continental expansion, while Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* (1890) trumpeted the call for American expansion abroad.

"For nearly three centuries the dominant fact in American life has been expansion," Turner observed, and then went on to argue that with the so-called close of the frontier at home in 1890, American attentions turned abroad: "the demands for a vigorous foreign policy, for an interoceanic canal, for a revival of our power upon the seas, and for the extension of American influence to outlying islands and adjoining countries are indications that the movement will continue" (1896/1994:73-74). A few years later he reported that "the expansion of the United States politically and commercially into lands beyond the seas" was proof that, "having completed conquest of the wilderness...we are beginning to consider relations of democracy and empire" (1903/1994:79-80).

In formulating strategy for the triumph of American sea power abroad, Mahan explained that "Colonies attached to the mother-country afford, therefore, the surest means of supporting abroad the sea power of a country" (1890:83); these colonies would form the "foundation-stones" of sea power (1890:345). Unfortunately, to Mahan's mind, "Such colonies the United States has not and is not likely to have" (1890:83). Unless a radical change was effected in its international outlook, the US was doomed to second rate status.

"Having therefore no foreign establishments, either colonial or military, the ships of war of the United States, in war, will be like land birds, unable to fly far from their own shores. To provide resting-places for them, where they can coal and repair, would be one of the first duties of a government proposing to itself the development of the power of the nation at sea (1890:83).

Among those whose understandings of history were shaped by Turner and Mahan was Theodore Roosevelt, who wrote a glowing review of *Sea Power* for the *Atlantic Monthly* shortly before he was appointed assistant secretary of the US Navy (Brands 1992:10-24).

INTO THE PACIFIC

It was Roosevelt, of course, who sent Admiral Dewey steaming for Manila even before the US had decided to declare war with Spain over alleged provocations in Cuba. Following the capture of Manila, Mahan and Roosevelt, among a host of other jingoes, insisted upon acquisition of all the Philippines. Whitelaw Reid, a former Republican vice-presidential candidate and member of the US commission sent to Europe to negotiate the terms of settlement with Spain, wrote excitedly of this new outpost located "directly in front of the Chinese Colossus, on a great territory of our own." The US, he exclaimed, now commands "the ocean that according to the old prediction, is to bear the bulk of the world's commerce in the twentieth century" (Stephanson 1995:94).

Prominent anti-imperialists such as Carl Schurz, former US senator, Interior Secretary, and editor, would continue to insist that annexation of populated territories abroad could not be made consonant with American values: "the United States, in order to preserve its basic nature, could not take in territories as dominions but only as full members to be; but if one did bring such alien spaces and populations in as full members, the essential character of the country would change anyway." Others marshaled a variety of arguments opposing any move to annex the Philippines, including observations that they would prove strategically more costly than any benefits they might render, that the US had "no bureaucratic machinery to deal with colonial peoples," and that "Americans had a very bad record taking care of wards domestically, as evidenced by blacks and Indians" (Stephanson 1995:101-102). All of these proved to be telling, even prescient, observations.

As it turned out, the Philippines, like Cuba, which had an equally well-developed domestic independence movement, would be governed

by the US long enough for it to put into place political institutions guaranteeing American suzerainty without ultimate social or political integration (Perez 1986). In the current context, a key question is why only Guam was acquired along with the Philippines, when inclusion of all the Marianas and Carolines was being called for in the American press and was certainly among the prerogatives the US considered implementing at the time (Millis 1989). It is no exaggeration to point out that the *intensity* of the mid-twentieth century American insistence upon absolute dominance over Micronesia is in many ways a direct consequence of the 1898 decision to forgo acquisition of the Carolines and Marianas.

The issue of greatest interest to the American public and its political leadership during the peace settlement of 1898 "was not whether the Marianas and Carolines should be annexed as well as the Philippines, but rather which, if any, of the Philippines themselves" (Pomeroy 1951:6). For purposes of establishing coaling and cable stations naval leaders contemplated acquisition of some of the Carolines and Marianas, particularly Guam. Commander Stockton, who had previously spent time in Micronesia, described the Marianas as "stepping stones...five days easy steaming from all ports of Japan, Korea, Shanghai and Hong Kong" (Gleaves 1925:280). Commander Bradford, whom the navy detailed to Paris to advise the American peace commission, explained to them that the Carolines would be especially dangerous in unfriendly hands. The Naval War Board (of which Mahan was the most influential member) concluded, however, that a station in Guam would suffice, "for naval stations, being points for attack and defense, should not be multiplied beyond the strictly necessary" (cited in Pomeroy 1951:14,9). Mahan had at the time seen the problem as a matter of reconciling the imperative of concentrating one's forces with the necessity of maintaining overseas stations, but within a few years he saw the German acquisition of Micronesia as a threat, and acknowledged that he had erred in opposing annexation of the Carolines and Marianas (Pomeroy 1951:23). As a consequence of this perceived lapse of diplomatic

and strategic judgment, Theodore Roosevelt would describe the American position in the Philippines as the country's "Achilles Heel," too far forward and cut off from Hawaii by foreign occupied territory to be properly defensible (Pomeroy 1951:23,27).

Strident demands for annexation of Micronesia were coming from politicians and the missionary establishment, which Pomeroy describes as having had as much if not more impact than naval interests. One influential editorial of June 1898 pronounced it "our imperative duty to turn the Spaniards out of the Caroline Islands and to restore and guarantee the happy conditions which had been produced by many years of noble American effort before the Spaniards laid their blighting hand upon that island group." Senator Henry Cabot Lodge informed the navy that because the Carolines and Marianas were dependencies of the Philippines, American claims to them were as good as its claims to the Philippines themselves (Pomeroy 1951:11-12).

In the end, however, the US opted not to annex Micronesia, and Spain then sold the islands to Germany. The War and Navy Departments immediately began developing plans, known as War Plan Orange, for moving across Micronesia into the Philippines in case of hostilities with Japan (Honan 1991). Although Japan occupied Micronesia at the outset of World War One and was later awarded the islands as a League of Nations Mandate, the US military in 1918 importuned President Wilson to acquire all of Micronesia (Pomeroy 1951:69).

With the end of World War Two the US military was no longer to be denied. Having twice failed to obtain territory that was known most commonly by the sobriquet "stepping stones," and believing that it suffered the ignominy of its losses at Pearl Harbor as a consequence, the US military insisted upon the outright annexation of Micronesia. "Never again," cried one senator, Thomas Hart, who as a captain in 1918 had worked on naval plans for peace negotiations with Germany (cited in Pomeroy 1951:170). In the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Hart wrote, "Our failure to acquire the Caroline,

Marshall, and Marianas Islands at the same time we shouldered the responsibility for the Philippines amounted to one of the most costly politico-military mistakes that any nation has ever made" (1948:115). If the cry of no more Munichs would provoke the American interventionism in Southeast Asia that characterized the 1960s, "Remember Pearl Harbor!" has been the guiding principle of America in Micronesia for the past six decades.

Pomeroy (1951:167) cites commentary from every sector of American leadership in the mid-1940s regarding the imperative of retaining Micronesia. Perhaps the testimony of Admiral Ernest King, commanding officer of the US Navy during the war, best captures this outlook.

These atolls, these island harbors will have been paid for by the sacrifice of American blood...

Failure to maintain these bases essential for our own defense raises the fundamental question—how long can the United States afford to continue a cycle of fighting and winning and giving away, only to fight and build and win and give away again? (King 1945).

Any lingering doubts about Micronesia's strategic significance for the US had been finally erased. Even if they would not all be developed as bases, the importance of strategic denial was now established. James Forrestal, who was Navy Secretary and then appointed the first US "Defense" Secretary, explained in the *New York Times*

"Single island positions cannot be considered strong bases. Selected islands can, however, together with Guam, form a far-reaching, mutually supporting base network, although each alone would fall far short of being an impregnable bastion" (9/24/46, p.28).

The Departments of State and Defense debated what the exact character of Micronesia's relationship with the US would be, finally agreeing that it should become a United Nations trust territory, but with a unique "strategic" status that placed it under Security Council, rather than Trusteeship Council, oversight (Louis 1977). Franklin Roosevelt's avowed opposition to colonialism was no

match for the combined weight of the military and Congress.

American possession of the keystone to the Joint Chiefs of Staff Pacific strategy was assured. The price had been high. During the war the administration had quietly dropped plans to use trusteeship to end colonialism. Now it had all but eliminated hope that the residents of the trusteeships could use trusteeship to win independence (Foltz 1989:335).

THE LESSONS OF LAND EXPROPRIATION AND IMPERIALISM

Having set the historical stage not only for the Americans' presence in Micronesia but for the military's insistence that the US retain the islands, I can now turn to a more specific problem in comparative history. What were Micronesians able to discern in patterns of American history that enabled them to negotiate as effectively and successfully as they have with the US? There are, of course, many relevant elements, but it seems to me that in this context the two most salient are to be found in a range of issues revolving around land and aspects of imperial geopolitics.

Land expropriation

In recognizing how integrally survival was tied to an ability to retain their land, Micronesians demonstrated a keen grasp of the relevant lessons to be learned from American history. Paula Marks has stressed the absolute centrality of land in the American Indians' struggle to resist European usurpation from its earliest stages. "The natives knew that its ownership was crucial to autonomous survival," and did whatever was necessary to hold onto it (Marks 1998:13). British American colonial policy was overwhelmingly dedicated to the project of stripping Native Americans of their lands. "The greatest distinguishing feature of English relations with the Indian groups was replacement of the Indians on the land by white settlers" (Prucha 1986:4). As in most historical cases, of course, there were notable exceptions to this pattern, but for the most part they simply prove the rule. Roger Williams's proposal that the Indians' prior claims to possession were entirely legitimate, and that lands should

be purchased rather than simply seized, for example, played a significant part in his exile from the Massachusetts Bay colony and the founding of Providence Plantation.

Gitlin observes that in Spanish New Mexico a royal official, the *protector de Indios*, was charged with preventing fraudulent land transactions and that in Spanish Louisiana traditional Indian land tenure was protected by law.

By way of contrast, Indian communities in British America had no standing in the empire.... There simply was no mechanism for including Indian communities in the fabric of state. British imperial ideology did not sanction inclusion, and British colonists did not desire it (Gitlin 1992:74-75).

The new republic simply replicated an already well-established pattern. As Prucha observes, "The conflict between the whites and Indians that marked American Indian relations was basically a conflict over land" (1986:44). When Chief Justice Marshall decided in favor of the Cherokee in the precedent-setting *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* and *Worcester v. Georgia* cases, President Andrew Jackson refused to enforce it, famously stating that "John Marshall has made his decision; now let him enforce it." As a consequence, Americans charged with negotiating with Indians found themselves confronting "the necessity of convincing the Indians of the government's good faith in order to keep them in a proper frame of mind for some impending treaty at which more concessions of land were to be sought" (Prucha 1986:47).

While "the rate and form of land taking" varied in response to local conditions, "everywhere Europeans came up with one device or another for denying Indian claims to land" (Cronon, Miles, and Gitlin 1992:14). Pretexts such as the Indians' supposed savagery rationalized these seizures. Turner's celebrated "frontier thesis" is built upon the notion that American expansion across the continent was made possible by the existence of almost unlimited "free land," systematically denying the existence and rights of its original inhabitants, but the notion was hardly original to him. As early as 1751 Benjamin Franklin drafted a

pamphlet, *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries, Etc.*, in which he projected that a high American birth rate would result from “an abundant supply of vacant land waiting always just beyond the frontier,” and that this “free land will constantly attract laborers from the cities and thus keep wages high” (Smith 1970:7).

Likewise, the practical implications of the free land thesis came as no surprise to the US military, even if others chose to ignore them. “Indian warfare absorbed 80 percent of the entire federal budget during George Washington’s administration and dogged his successors for a century as a major issue and expense. Yet most of our textbooks barely mention the topic” (Loewen 1995:108-109). In 1885, just a few years before Turner first presented his “frontier thesis” at the Chicago World’s Fair, the army dispatched a military expedition to the Copper River region of south central Alaska. Its orders noted that “the conflicting interests between the white people and the Indians of the Territory may in the near future result in serious disturbances between the two races.” Its mission was to locate resources upon which any military units dispatched to the area could rely. Although the local population “had heretofore been entirely peaceful in their dealings with Americans, the United States was planning for violence” (Cronon 1992:41).

When the US achieved United Nations approval for its control of Micronesia, the government transferred responsibility for the trusteeship from the Navy to the Interior Department, where it was paired with Indian affairs. Limerick suggests that in Cold War America essentially similar attitudes “influenced Indian affairs as well as foreign policy” (1987:209). And Burt refers to “a bloc of conservative congressmen known as terminationists who advocated an end to trust arrangements and any remaining tribal sovereignty” (1982:4-5).

Micronesians often spoke of their frustration at being included within the Interior Department, rather than being treated as foreign peoples whose affairs lay more properly with the State Department. But perhaps this venue more speedily enabled Micronesians to

come to terms with an aspect of American life that Carleton Beals phrases directly and succinctly: “Our acquiescence in Indian dispossession has molded the American character” (1939:63-64).

Imperial geopolitics

Late twentieth and twenty-first century Americans have been systematically taught that theirs is not an imperial state—indeed if they have learned anything, it is that their government has been at the forefront of anti-colonialism. D.W. Meinig’s extraordinarily comprehensive account of American expansion develops this point in a variety of ways. He examines the dilemma facing American leadership at the outset of the nineteenth century: “how to have ‘expansion with honor’; that is, how to dispossess the Indians of their lands with a clear conscience, how to get such people out of the way without affronting the moral opinion of mankind” (1993:78). Regarding the treaties the US government repeatedly signed and abrogated, Meinig observes that “the gross difference between the promise and the performance in the matter is of course one of the great scandals in American history” (1993:99). He quotes Josiah Royce’s 1886 observations about the conquest of California: “The American wants to persuade not only the world but himself that he is doing God service in a peaceable spirit, even when he violently takes what he is determined to get” (Royce 1886/1948:119). In concluding his chapter on “the management of captive peoples,” Meinig describes the United States as “an unusually severe imperial power,” not only driving groups off their lands but pressuring them to abandon “their identity as a people.” And in the context of how nineteenth-century imperialists treated the populations they subordinated he concludes that “the United States was the most massive and systematic case of its time and notable as well for enveloping the whole drastic process with assurances to the people involved and to the rest of the world of its special virtues and noble intentions” (1993:193).

Processes of land expropriation and imperial expansion obviously went hand in hand. The early American republic, in the years im-

mediately following the conclusion of the war for independence, found itself simply assuming as its own Britain's previous North American rivalries with French and Spanish empires. In later years, contests with British and Russian empires would be added, even as France dropped out of the picture. Conflict with Spain "had been in progress for generations before the Revolution. It merely entered upon a new phase when the thirteen colonies of British North America won their independence" (Whitaker 1927:1). Much of this dispute centered on rights to navigate the Mississippi and access to the port of New Orleans, but in fact the Spanish frontier with the United States ran from the Atlantic shore bordering Georgia in a great arc reaching to Canada.

Given the profoundly expansionist character of early America, this borderland was no stationary frontier; it was contested, actively and consciously, from the outset. "Interest in acquiring Mexican territory had been a factor in American history since the close of the Revolution" (Fuller 1936:12). Fuller quotes a 1786 article in a Philadelphia publication promoting "conquest of the richest country in the world" by sending two thousand or so Americans to Natchez and thence to West Florida and Louisiana; following conquests there the filibusters "would carry the war into the very heart of Mexico" (1936:12-13).

Arguments on behalf of this westward drive into Spanish/Mexican territory were of the sort still encountered in present-day geopolitical discussions. Occupation of the far west was "essential for the perfect security of Western and Southern interests and those interests will be greatly promoted" by gaining title to the Pacific shore, and would thereby permit the US to "secure a sufficient number of good Harbors on that Ocean," ran an 1844 letter from a justice of the Ohio Supreme Court to Sen. John Calhoun (Fuller 1936:21). President Polk exulted to Congress, after it ratified the treaty marking the end of the war with Mexico:

"By the acquisition of these possessions, we are brought into the immediate proximity with the west coast of America, from Cape Horn to the Russian possessions north of Oregon; with the islands of the Pacific Ocean, and, by a direct voyage in steamers,

we will be in less than thirty days of Canton and other parts of China" (quoted in Meinig 1993:159).

Congressional debates in the 1840s repeatedly invoked Americans' duty to spread their government's "blessings over the entire continent" (Fuller 1936:22-23). Legislators introduced resolutions to begin negotiating with Spain for the annexation of Cuba, and Santo Domingo was eyed as well (Fuller 1936:28-30). When the US government was seriously considering annexation of Mexico's Yucatan province, it was argued that the peninsula's position adjacent to Cuba and Florida meant that it would present a grave threat to American peace and security if it were to become a colony of a European power. Its position, moreover, guarded passage to California via the isthmus of Panama and was deemed essential to the safety of American shipping (Meinig 1993:154-155).

Manifest destiny, as it was dubbed at the time, was a complex matter: it was a response to commercial interests seeking harbors on the Pacific, strategic interests seeking to prevent further European imperial expansion on the continent, and to calls "to bring the blessings of enlightenment and democratic principles of government to the benighted peoples of the continent" (Fuller 1936:38). All of these arguments were to be marshaled in 1898 and again in 1947, when the US pondered how best to absorb Micronesia.

The web of continuity running from the years preceding the American Revolution through the complex course of American expansionism is not seamless, but it is consistent enough to confound any claims that the US has not been an imperial actor, deeply concerned with geopolitical advantage. In this context, it is difficult to credit commonly made distinctions between continental and overseas expansion. The march west was always viewed in terms—including national security, commercial advantage, and humanitarian ideals—that are identical to those employed in justifying expansion abroad. In Henry Nash Smith's formulation

The early visions of an Empire embody two different if often intermingled conceptions. There is on the one hand the notion of empire as command of the sea, and on the other hand the notion of empire as a populous future society occupying the interior of the American continent (Smith 1970:12).

MICRONESIANS APPLY THE LESSONS OF AMERICAN HISTORY

Among the experiences shared by Micronesian leaders—who come from islands spread across three thousand miles of the open Pacific Ocean and which by no means constituted anything like a heterogeneous group—was the extraordinarily destructive violence, deprivation, and helplessness visited upon them by World War Two, much of which was fought on and around their islands. The US position in Micronesia was unarguably geopolitical, and therefore imperial, in nature, and yet the Micronesians were consistently told by the Americans that they were acting largely out of humanitarian noblesse oblige. That gap between what American leaders said about their intentions and what the Micronesians could observe for themselves played a significant role in shaping the Micronesians' analyses of what their future was likely to bring, and what their course ought to be. They had learned the truth of what de Tocqueville observed about America's Indian policy 150 years earlier: "It is impossible to destroy men with more respect for the laws of humanity" (2000: vol. 1, 325).

Micronesians in general and their leaders in particular were forced by circumstances to confront both the imperial legacy with which they were being endowed and the Americans' inability—or unwillingness—to acknowledge it themselves. Looking back now, the Micronesian leaders who took responsibility for negotiations with the US recognize that they quickly perceived the pivot upon which turned the downfall of other peoples colonized by America. This was land: loss of land meant forfeiting not only one's subsistence and livelihood, but a people's identity and the concrete base upon which they might anchor their claims to and pursuit of sovereignty (Petersen 1999a).

There are, to be sure, significant differences between what appears in the Congress of Micronesia's (CoM) archival records and what former CoM leaders now recall in interviews. In the 1960s and '70s, these men rarely spoke directly about their fears concerning the United States' intentions in Micronesia. It is not that there are no remarks in the records, but rather that they tend to be made in passing. Only rarely does the real character of their fears pour out at length and with intense clarity. It would be easy to conclude, reading only the written record, that these occasional outbursts were not so much representative of deeper feelings or understandings as they were a calculated negotiating ploy.

Likewise, if one had access only to present-day commentary from these leaders, it would be possible to think that the awareness of American historical precedents they readily acknowledge today was freely expressed during the original negotiations. In comparing the two types of sources, we can see that the Micronesian leaders knew what they wanted at the time, but rarely vocalized it in direct terms. This is in keeping with the character of Micronesian political performance style.

When the Congress of Micronesia first convened in 1965, many of its original members had been students together at the University of Hawaii. Tosiwo Nakayama, who would in time become the CoM Senate's President, President of the original Micronesian Constitutional Convention, and the first President of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), was still a Hawaii student when he was first elected to the Congress. Members and staff of the early Congress vividly recall the intensity that marked their time at the university. Some of them suggest that the most important political lessons they learned were gained outside the classroom, an opinion shared by Prof. Norman Meller, who taught them political science. Bethwel Henry, who served for years as Speaker of the CoM's House of Representatives and is one of the most theoretically sophisticated of those who led the negotiations, qualifies this recollection, however, by explaining that their basic unfamiliarity with American political institutions and ideas meant

that they could not help but learn a great deal in every context in which they found themselves.

Whatever the sources of their education, it is clear that when these young scholars arrived in Saipan to take up their congressional responsibilities, they brought with them the excitement, intensity, and ideas they had shared in Hawaii. That is, the first crucial turning point in the history of Micronesian efforts to reclaim self-government was shaped not only by the Micronesians' common colonial and war experiences, but by a mutual commitment to considering the trajectory of American history and its relevance for contemporary Micronesia. This latter charge entailed examination of both the rhetoric of America's struggles for independence and equality and the relentless drive of American territorial expansion that has disenfranchised, pauperized, and destroyed many of the minority peoples in its path.

The Congress almost immediately created a committee responsible for exploring Micronesia's future political status; among the very first projects it undertook was systematic consideration of the other American territories and their respective political histories and relationships with the United States. Members were already well acquainted with the situation in Guam, which is geographically part of Micronesia's Marianas Islands but politically separate and relatively more integrated into the American system, and in their years in Hawaii they had been able to study its transition from territory to statehood (which occurred in 1959), but they wanted to survey the character of American rule and local conditions in Puerto Rico, American Samoa, and the Virgin Islands, including economic, political, social, and cultural developments.

Any change in their relationship with the US would have potential drawbacks, they knew, because they recognized that Micronesia, unlike every other territorial acquisition in America's history, was to a degree protected by United Nations oversight. As the UN's sole "strategic" trust territory, Micronesia's affairs fell within the purview of the Security Council, rather than the Trusteeship Council, but the activities of the UN's Special Committee on

Decolonization (also known as the Committee of 24), the existence of which had not been contemplated when the trusteeship system was initially devised, had begun to move Micronesian affairs from out of the shadow into which they had initially been cast. Once a change in status had been effected, Micronesia would lose that patronage and whatever safeguards it afforded them. The United States had made it abundantly clear that it would brook no interference by the UN in what it considered its internal affairs, resolutely insisting that none of its other overseas possessions were colonies and that all therefore lay outside the UN's purview.

At the same time, however, many Micronesian leaders also believed that the status quo was itself fraught with far too much uncertainty. The "strategic" qualifications attached to the trusteeship agreement enabled the US to keep the United Nations at bay if it chose to by prohibiting its representatives entry into the territory (and the US had indeed done so during the trusteeship's early years). The danger Micronesians perceived in the almost absolute power the US wielded in Micronesia was not simply inherent in the power itself but also in what they saw in the attitude of the US government—especially the Congress—toward Micronesia's future. There was widespread understanding among Micronesian leaders in the 1960s that to the extent that the US was aware of Micronesian status issues at all, it was operating entirely upon assumptions both that the islands would with all certainty be absorbed and integrated into the American system and that the Micronesians themselves were, to the degree that they were even aware of the issue, eager to become permanent possessions of the US. The most critical lessons Micronesian leaders absorbed came from the following contexts: Hawaii, American Indians, political status arrangements, and land rights.

Hawaii

As Micronesian leaders understood the history of other American territorial acquisitions, their peoples had all experienced a steady diminution of local self-sufficiency, self-reliance, self-respect, and as a consequence, local autonomy.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the Hawaiian Islands, where native Hawaiians have occupied the lowest rungs in the islands' social, economic, and political class systems, but Micronesians were also quite conscious that this was what had happened to American Indians as well. Those who survived did so at the margins, on lands that were minuscule fractions of what they had once possessed, or without lands at all.

Most members of the Congress of Micronesia in its first few years had spent time studying at the University of Hawaii's main campus in Honolulu's Manoa Valley. A former FSM president recalled that Micronesian students in Hawaii in the 1950s and '60s talked with one another not only about Micronesia but about what they were seeing around them. It was clear to the Micronesians, he said, that the native Hawaiians had "lost everything to whites, and we were determined not to let that happen in Micronesia." These students concluded that their identity as Micronesians was critical to their survival: as part of the US, they would be no more than a tiny minority and would inevitably lose their land and their identity.

Bethwel Henry spoke of both his high school experiences on Maui and his years at Manoa. The native Hawaiian activists he knew and spent time with explicitly told the Micronesian students what they thought they should be doing to defend their interests. The Micronesians recognized, however, that despite the very relevant historical parallels, their political situation was not the same as the Hawaiians' and that their options were significantly different. But he did begin to see the web of relationships between a people's loss of their land and problems of losing their identity. Observing the continuing marginalization of Hawaiians and, on his visits to the mainland, seeing the position of Black Americans made him highly conscious of what it would mean to be a minority people in the United States.

Henry's recollections mirror those of many others with whom I spoke. It might be argued that his perspective has been shaped by thirty years of reflection and experience, but the journals from those early years of the Micro-

nesian Congress indicate that these issues *were* on the minds of its members from the outset of their negotiations with the US. Micronesian political style calls for moderation and understatement, and Micronesian responses to American pressures to accept the outright annexation of Micronesia were only occasionally made in public contexts.

Roman Tmetuchl, one of the most influential Belauans, both within the Congress and in Belau, predicted that in a Micronesia fully absorbed into the American polity Micronesians would be next in a long line of minorities, and would experience not only the dispossession of the Hawaiians and Indians but the marginalization of Blacks and Puerto Ricans. Micronesians would become citizens, he said, but they would be second class citizens (Congress of Micronesia 1971 I:49).⁴ Amata Kabua, who would go on to become the first president of the Marshall Islands, pointed to the experiences of the Hawaiians, Guamanians, Puerto Ricans, and Filipinos and marveled at the "agility" of the US in applying the principles of self-determination (CoM 1971 I:52).

Heinrich Iriarte, a high-ranking Pohnpeian chief as well as a member of the Congress, cited the history of Hawaii, Guam, and Puerto Rico. The peoples of those islands gave into American pressures, he said. It is now too late for them. Do we want to be like them, he asked, or do we intend to retain our cultures and identity? (CoM 1971 I:55). Francisco Palacios, of the Marianas, summed up the feelings of many of his colleagues regarding the course of the negotiations with the US when he asserted that "If we continue, we'll lose our lands like the American Indians and the Hawaiians (CoM Senate 1969:354)."

American Indians

Bethwel Henry vividly recalls a youthful trip across the United States with a fellow Micronesian student, and a helpful Kansas City cab driver who was trying, unsuccessfully, to find them a hotel where they might spend the night. Finally, he radioed his dispatcher, asking where there was a hotel that would put up "a couple of colored boys." The experience was a revelation. On that same trip he made a visit to the

Navaho Reservation, but found the situation in the middle of the southwestern desert so totally foreign that he came away with few insights. Other leaders, however, saw striking similarities. Lazarus Sali, the Micronesian Senate's chief negotiator, feared that Micronesians would become America's "newest, smallest non-white minority, like American Indians," if the commonwealth status the US was proposing were approved (CoM 1971:25). Representative Atalig likened the consequences of a close relationship with the US to Custer's Last Stand, "with us as the white men" (CoM 1971 II:8).

Many Micronesian leaders pointed to the Interior Department's long history of administering American Indian affairs. In general, Micronesians wanted to see their relations with the US government channeled through the State Department, partly because of Interior's record with the Indians, but also because they wanted to be recognized as sovereign peoples who should be dealing on a government-to-government basis with the US, rather than as its wards.

Political status arrangements

Micronesian congressional leaders and staff made visits to both American territories and to some of the Pacific island possessions of other colonial powers, evaluating a wide variety of political status arrangements. They initially thought that "commonwealth," as it is defined in Puerto Rico, would be the most appropriate immediate goal for Micronesia. It is clear from their recollections and from the congressional journals, however, that they soon realized that while both the US government and the Micronesian leadership viewed commonwealth status as transitional, they held absolutely contrary views concerning the political status toward which such a transition would ultimately lead. Micronesians assumed that it was to be a stage on the route to complete autonomy and independence; for the Americans commonwealth was a step toward eventual full integration into the US.

In 1968-1969 US negotiators modified Guam's Organic Act and then presented it to the CoM. This would have "organized" the

trust territory as a commonwealth. As a current high-ranking FSM leader, who was a young congressional staffer in those early days, explained to me in 1996, the US negotiators believed that the trust territory was passing through precisely the same stages as other American territories had, and therefore assumed that what Micronesians wanted was for their islands simply to move on to the next stage toward full integration into the US. There was, he said, absolutely no awareness in Washington of what the Micronesians were attempting to achieve. A 1970 report from the CoM Political Status Committee notes that the US negotiating position was based entirely on previous experiences with other American territories (CoM 1970:45). The US wanted initially to confer upon the trust territory the same unincorporated status held by Samoa and Guam, but in light of the active role the Micronesian congress was playing, it was now ready to allow the islands to move on to the commonwealth status achieved two decades earlier by Puerto Rico.

US Congressman Lee Aspinall, one of the most influential of the American negotiators, believed it was necessary for Micronesia to follow the same slow evolutionary route through the political status process that other territories were taking. He did not want to see the trust territory assigned higher priority than Guam and Samoa. When the Micronesians tried to explain that what they were seeking was their own constitutional convention, Aspinall made it clear that what they were going to receive from the US was an organic act. Hawaii's Senator Hiram Fong, highly influential as a representative of the adjacent former US island territory, was at this same time proposing to have Micronesia wholly incorporated into the state of Hawaii (Dorrance 1975:185, 196).

A number of Micronesian leaders who traveled to Puerto Rico drew largely the same conclusions. Bethwel Henry recalls that he and Petrus Tun, probably the most influential Yap leader in those days, did not think Puerto Rico's situation was especially relevant to Micronesia because of its much greater size and particularly because it is so much closer to

the US, but they were impressed with the degree of local autonomy they encountered there. They initially thought commonwealth of the sort the Puerto Ricans had achieved would provide them with considerably more self-government than either Guam or Samoa seemed to have. That opinion did not last long, however, because it was not long after that trip to Puerto Rico that a Micronesian delegation to the Cook Islands was struck by the significantly greater degree of autonomy that "free association" with New Zealand afforded the Cooks.⁵ The Micronesians' ultimate interest was in the maximum degree of self-government that could possibly be achieved, and not merely an accommodation with the US.

A long-term leader of Pohnpei state's legislature echoed aspects of this outlook. He recalled that he was not especially interested in Puerto Rico when he traveled there on a US State Department leadership tour, but what he did discover while talking to people there was that they wanted not only continued close ties with the US and American financial support, but also their autonomy. He was struck by the fact that they faced the same choice between closer and more distant ties with the US, and seemed not at all sure which direction they should head in.

It is important to note in this context that Micronesians have always recognized that they face precisely this same choice. In 1975, when the trust territory's peoples voted in a referendum on what their future relationship with the US should be, Pohnpeians explicitly framed the choice between independence and free association with the US as being between "breadfruit or rice." Breadfruit, the local staple foodstuff, represented independence; imported rice represented free association. A majority voted for breadfruit (Petersen 1975, 1979). That is, Micronesians have always found themselves facing the same choices as the peoples of other American territories, and found it difficult to decide among them, but in the end a majority of them have opted for less American financial support and more autonomy.

Land rights

At its core—as the axis around which nearly every aspect of the Micronesians' considerations of political status turned, the nexus linking all the multiple strands of the negotiations—the question of Micronesia's future was about land: to whom did Micronesia's land belong and to whom would it ultimately revert? And because of land's singular importance in the status process, the historical experiences of American Indians and Native Hawaiians were seen as perhaps of greater relevance than the rest of America's colonial history. It was not simply a matter of these peoples' current statuses but also of the policies that have brought about these conditions.

The magnitude of the role land played in shaping the course of Micronesia's status negotiations is immediately apparent in both present-day recollections of that earlier time and in contemporaneous documents. A former FSM president explained to me just how clear it had been to him that as part of the United States, Micronesians would lose their land and that without their land they would swiftly lose their identity: they would no longer be Micronesians. Another leader explained that in Micronesia one's sense of oneself comes from one's family history, which in turns derives from the family's land. Our land, he said, cannot be understood in terms of a piece of paper (that is, a land deed). Our land is about the history of our people. P.F. Kluge quotes former president Nakayama on why he pursued independence for Micronesia:

If you ask me what motivated me to stay as far away from the US, it was people's attitudes. That and the fear of the loss of land. These islands are god-given. Who are we to give them away? (Kluge 1991:108).

Bethwel Henry points out that Micronesians' anxieties about loss of their lands did not begin with the American occupation. His generation lived first under Japanese rule and had seen the alienation of vast tracks of Micronesian lands. (Some 69% of the trust territory's lands were claimed by the US as "public lands" because they had been alienated by the Japanese.) Henry, too, linked the potential loss of

Micronesian lands to what would inevitably be the loss of Micronesian identity. The Micronesians' land, he said, serves not simply as a source of food but also as a source of their sense of themselves. Beyond this, however, he spelled out the logical syllogism that underlies the essence of Micronesian fears not only about losing their land but about what its subsequent possession by the US would bring. "If the US were to have ultimate authority over Micronesian land," he explained, "then it would have ultimate authority over Micronesians." "We recognized," said another of the key architects of Micronesia's political status, "that Micronesian independence could only be achieved as long as we were able to keep control of our land."

In Congressional journals and documents from the late 1960's and early '70s land surfaces again and again as one of the principal objects—if not *the* principal object—of the congressional representatives' concerns in their dealings with the Trust Territory's American administration. There are repeated discussions of and challenges to the US administration's claim that it possessed the right of eminent domain (for example, CoM House of Representatives 1967:22-24, 72-76; CoM Senate 1968:330-31, 354). The American High Commissioner vetoed congressional legislation attempting to terminate the administration's eminent domain (CoM House of Representatives 1968:196-198). Amata Kabua explained to people that the purpose of a particular piece of congressional legislation was to restrict the American government from "taking your father's land" (CoM Senate 1968:171).

Palacios stated the case most plainly, arguing that many of the land tenure problems and disputes people were experiencing came about because the American administration was trying to solve Micronesian land issues with "Anglo-Saxon methods and procedures." "If we continue to let this administering power handle our land situation, we will lose our lands as the American Indians and the Hawaiians lost their lands." (CoM Senate 1969:354)

A Contemporaneous American Perspective

The American negotiating team, which included representatives from the Departments of State and Interior, was in fact tacitly run by the military establishment. It considered itself firmly bound to a requirement that the US retain eminent domain over Micronesian lands, in order to ensure access to sites for military bases, and the US Congress's legislative oversight re-affirmed this position. Every proposal the Micronesian negotiators put forward faced the test of whether it legally preserved American ascendancy over Micronesian lands and rights to establish bases wherever the US desired to place them.

The Micronesian leaders' grasp of this fundamental American policy was accurate. John Dorrance, the US State Department's Micronesian expert and member of the United States' negotiating team, prepared a comprehensive review of the Micronesian political status situation in an 800-page report for the National War College. Because this study was completed in March 1975, four months before the Micronesian Constitutional Convention got underway in Saipan, and because Dorrance was, by virtue of his position, intimately familiar with both the course of the negotiations and the Micronesian leaders engaged in them, his account provides us with an astute analysis of the entire process from a contemporaneous American perspective.

At the outset he noted that "It can be argued that *the US has had an overriding focus of interest in Micronesia's lands.*" "That interest," he continued, "has translated into a basic political objective, a perceived requirement for political relationships with Micronesia which assure US access to Micronesian lands for bases, and denial of Micronesian lands to others" (1975:3-4, emphasis added). Gen. Lewis Walt, at the time Deputy Commandant of the US Marine Corps, had unofficially informed Micronesian leaders, Dorrance reported, "that the US could and if necessary would seize lands for US defense purposes" (1975:193).

In summary, Dorrance's study lays out the US military's initial operating assumptions that it must retain Micronesian lands for bases and that the Micronesians would pose no obstacles

to the military in achieving its goals. Analyzing the earlier context in hindsight, he recognizes that by the end of the 1960s the CoM's actions were reflecting Micronesian fears that the US would pre-empt the Micronesians' claims to their lands. While other aspects of the status negotiations between the US and the Micronesians had been resolved by the early 1970s, land issues remained intractable. Most Micronesians, Dorrance deduces, had come to believe that the US government was unable to comprehend their concerns. In part this was because American negotiators had come to believe that the Micronesian leaders' insistence on gaining and retaining ultimate control over their lands was no more than a negotiating ploy and thus did not represent the aspirations of the Micronesian populace in general. The CoM insisted that it could not commit Micronesian lands without local consent; Dorrance interprets this as reflecting what he describes as almost universal hostility and suspicion toward the US regarding any and all matters having to do with land. Negotiations stalled when the CoM insisted that the US return to Micronesian hands the so-called "public lands," and that it do so through the agency of the Micronesian Congress. When the Secretary of the Interior insisted instead that the US would deal separately with each of the Trust Territory's six districts, the CoM leaders saw this as a flagrant example of divide-and-conquer tactics. They walked out of the negotiations at just that point, in December of 1974.

LAND AND POLITICAL STATUS

Negotiations were almost entirely derailed as various tacks were explored by both sides. Most obvious was this American attempt to negotiate land issues with the Trust Territory's districts on an individual basis.⁶ This strategy met with overwhelming rejection and even outrage on the part of both the Micronesian Congress and much of the populace. When it became clear that this approach would not succeed, the US began instead to negotiate political status accords with the districts that had been showing less interest in preserving some form of Micronesian unity.

The Marianas, Belau, and Marshalls districts, for a variety of reasons, most prominently having to do with financial and ethnic factors, had seriously been considering the possibility of entering into separate negotiations with the US. There can be no doubt that some of their rationales sprang from local causes and conditions, but it is equally the case that they were exacerbated by American policies. By the time of the 1975 Micronesian Constitutional Convention in Saipan, the fault lines had become dramatically visible. The Marianas had already agreed to a separate compact of commonwealth with the US, many in the Marshalls were boycotting the Convention, and Belau was using its readiness to bolt in order to extract major constitutional concessions (Meller 1985).

While multiple local factors inclined these districts to pursue their separate ways, it must immediately be noted that the US engaged in one of very few substantial partitions of colonial territory ever to take place in the post-war wave of decolonization, and the only one to carve four different polities out of a single colony (with a population of barely 100,000 people, moreover). By dealing directly with the leaders of districts receiving or slated to receive the largest amounts of US funding, the US sought to break down the resistance of the Micronesian Congress. While negotiations subsequently fractured along precisely these lines, the US may in fact have managed to do no more than win a battle even as it was losing the war.

The character of the negotiations themselves, in the end, convinced Micronesian leaders (that is, all but those from the Marianas) that the only way they would be able to survive as Micronesians was to pursue complete autonomy. Anything less would require them to acknowledge ultimate US suzerainty and thus see them simply repeat the sorry history of America's other subject peoples.

The Compacts of Free Association finally agreed upon between the US and the Micronesian governments have finessed the issue of US basing rights by making them part of an appended mutual defense agreement, which states that the US can pretty much do as it

pleases in Micronesia, as long as it claims that it is doing so for “security” reasons (Petersen 1995).

Whether one considers contemporaneous Micronesian documents, the present-day recollections of the Micronesian leaders who negotiated with the US, or Dorrance’s informed account of the American position, it is clear that land lay at the focal point of the tensions between the two sides. The US insisted that it retain definitive control over Micronesian lands; the Micronesians insisted that they regain control of their own lands; ultimately the dispute was resolved via ambiguity.

It is equally clear, however, that as the Micronesians began the process of negotiating for autonomy from the US they consciously and deliberately turned to an examination of America’s previous history regarding the political status of indigenous peoples in US occupied territories. They learned that retaining control over their lands was not merely vital to their physical survival but absolutely essential to their survival as distinct peoples. Ironically, as they came to grasp this truth and attempted to put it to use, the US government responded by insisting unremittingly that it, and not the Micronesians, would possess ultimate authority over Micronesian lands. And, of course, the more the US insisted on controlling their lands, the more the Micronesians were convinced that unless they successfully resisted they would repeat the history of the American Indians and Hawaiians.

CONCLUSION

The doctrine that spells out the American presence in Micronesia is known as “strategic denial,” that is, the US has always sought to deny access to Micronesia to any other power that might possibly seek to use it for strategic (i.e., military) purposes. This is an ancient principle in the armory of international relations, and is not even new in Micronesia: it characterized the long Spanish occupation of parts of the area and Spain’s claims to most of the rest. It is an old American stratagem as well—the Monroe Doctrine is one of strategic denial. Nor is it even new to the American presence in

the Pacific. The US claimed denial rights in the Hawaiian islands long before it annexed them.

I emphasize this point in order to draw attention to a contradiction that helps explain the self-defeating features of American rule in Micronesia. The US has throughout its history been an expansive, imperial power. At the same time, however, there has been a marked tendency for Americans to deny that this is so. One finds ample reference to this psychological or intellectual form of denial immediately following the US occupation of Micronesia at the end of World War Two (Petersen 1999b). In the course of discussions about how to administer the islands, there are continual references to America’s lack of a colonial tradition and, as a consequence, its unpreparedness to administer the area, never having developed a colonial service corps along the lines of the European powers.

It was the American government’s denial of what it was doing in Micronesia, as much as anything else, that determined the course of the status negotiations between the US and the Congress of Micronesia. There can be no doubt that the Americans’ intention was to retain Micronesia in perpetuity, no matter what contemporary official claims might have implied to the contrary. The evidence is to be found in the record of the struggle that hammered out the strategic trusteeship concept. It can be seen in the record of the commission President Kennedy sent to Micronesia to determine how best to convince the Micronesians to agree to political integration into the US (known as the Solomon Report) and the policies intended to implement it (McHenry 1975). It is acknowledged by the State Department’s permanent representative on the American negotiating team (Dorrance 1992). And it was delicately referred to in the course of the negotiations themselves.

The American position was no mystery to Micronesians: they understood it perfectly well, as indeed, they were meant to. At the same time, however, Micronesians were consistently instructed that the US was an anti-colonial power, that it was in Micronesia for the Micronesians’ own good, and that self-determination was of paramount political value. The contra-

dictions were—and remain—palpable, yet the American administration was unable or unwilling to acknowledge them; in its behavior the US it made it abundantly clear to the Micronesians that they could not rely upon American assurances about their rights to self-determination, self-government, and retention of their lands. Rather, Micronesian leaders had to ground their approach to the negotiations on America's historical record. And that told them, in very much the same sort of terms that the arrogance of the US Congress, the military, and State Department was making clear to them, that relatively small populations of darker-skinned people who lay in the path of American expansion have always been deemed expendable.

America's liberal traditions and rhetoric meant that the removal, marginalization, forced assimilation, and disenfranchisement that accompanied and effected this process were soft-peddled and denied, or, more conveniently, explained as being in the best interests of those who were being eradicated by them. Continued attempts to saddle Micronesia with some sort of organic act, in order to organize it as a territory, and insistence that it remain under the purview of the Interior Department, with its history of administering Indians, rather than having Micronesian affairs lodged with the State Department, which would have recognized the islands as potentially self-determining, along with the American government's absolute requirement that it possess eminent domain powers over Micronesia's land, served only to provoke the doubts of the Micronesian leaders charged with negotiations. This situation was offset, ironically, by the Americans' rhetoric of independence and the glories of their own struggles to wrest their land from recalcitrant colonial rulers.

It can be fairly argued, then, that the entire sweep of US expansion across the North American continent, into the Caribbean, and out across the Pacific, coupled with the twin rhetorical spins celebrating independence and explaining away America's systematic denial of indigenous rights, shaped and motivated the Micronesians' experience with the problems of negotiating self-determination. The greater the

American emphasis on these points, the starker did its own perfidy—its own unwillingness to practice what it preached—appear to those engaged in seeking autonomy.

My own initial understanding, based upon my previous knowledge of the Micronesian negotiations and the Puerto Rican experience, was that many, perhaps most, Micronesians realized that the longer they remained directly subject to and politically (as well as economically) dependent upon the US, the less able they would be to sever the bonds, and the less likely they would be to achieve real autonomy by establishing themselves as independent peoples. While this was indeed the case, my more recent work has convinced me that there was a more effective and immediate factor at work here. This was their awareness of the historical trajectory that describes the demise of so many peoples made subject to the US. Loss of land results not only in the loss of livelihood and thus a people's physical means of reproducing themselves, but in the loss of a place in which to root their identity—not simply as individuals within an American nation, but as distinct peoples with values, customs, and desires that run counter to the American notion that the course of civilization runs inexorably in the direction of becoming Americanized. The Americans' unwillingness and inability to grasp this central aspect of their history merely reaffirmed the Micronesians' commitment to an alternative future.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Because the Northern Marianas chose to pursue a more closely integrated relationship with the US, rather than independence, I am largely excluding it from this account of Micronesian independence.
- 2 The Republic of Belau's negotiations took longer; it joined the UN in 1994. The Marianas Islands became the US Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas with the end of trusteeship.
- 3 "Claimed by the United States."
- 4 During the course of the negotiations the Micronesian Congress assembled remarks concerning political status from its previous sessions into two volumes labeled "Political Status Digest," Parts I and II. For the sake of

convenience, wherever possible my citations are to these, rather than to the original journals.

- 5 It should be noted that while the term rendered in English is "commonwealth," Puerto Rico officially refers to itself as "Estado Libre Asociado," the literal translation of which, "freely associated state," is the status the Micro-

nesians negotiated with the US, before they joined the UN and achieved independence.

- 6 Negotiating treaties with minority tribal factions was a standard tactic employed by the US in the course of Indian removal. See for instance the Cherokee case (McLoughlin 1993:1-34).

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Glenn Petersen's first experience in the Western Pacific came when he was sent at age 19 to fight in Vietnam. He set out to become an anthropologist in order to learn more about the Pacific's peoples, and began his work in Micronesia in order to document the impact of American colonial administration there. He has studied and published on traditional and contemporary politics, social organization, and economics in Pohnpei and the Eastern Caroline Islands since the early 1970s, served as a member of the Federated States of Micronesia's Permanent Mission to the United Nations, and has for many years headed his academic department.

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