

Decolonising American Micronesia

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This writing of this Working Paper was prompted by the American decision in 2019 to renegotiate the Compacts of Free Association between the United States and the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) and the Republic of Palau. At stake are the expiring provisions of the Compact in each case, and initial talks began in May 2020. In particular, Bill Fisher, who served as Australian consul general to Micronesia 1983–87, wished to set the record straight, from his personal perspective, on Australia's historical role in encouraging the incorporation of the three freely associated states into the wider diplomatic network of Pacific regionalism, especially into the South Pacific Forum. His account is revealing as only a personal account can be. Stewart Firth sets this account in the wider historical framework of the time, from the Cold War to the response of the region to French nuclear tests.

A Personal Perspective on Palau, Federated States of Micronesia and Marshall Islands Becoming Freely Associated States

William Fisher

My first visit to the three Micronesian states was in 1984 and I was shocked by what I found. Having covered the South Pacific countries and territories previously, both on posting, in regional meetings and visits, and finally as head of the South Pacific Branch of the Department of Foreign Affairs, I was used both to the colonial parsimony of the United Kingdom in its colonies and, in contrast, the financial 'generosity' of the French. I assumed that — given that the United States had put so much effort into insisting on the strategic importance of Micronesia, not to mention the wartime memory of just how much these areas had been crucial to the US effort in World War Two — by the 1980s the American effort in Micronesia would be accordingly generous. I was astonished at the lack of development — no sealed roads in Pohnpei, very little public services, appalling living conditions, particularly in the Marshall Islands; in fact, not much sign of development anywhere.

The answer of course was obvious: the original ruler from 1947 to 1951 was the US Navy, not much

interested then in those postwar years in 'native welfare' (nor in fairness were any of the other colonial powers in the Pacific, other than the Australian and New Zealand Labour governments in the late 1940s). And when the US Department of the Interior took over from the navy, nothing much changed. American generosity seen elsewhere in the wartime Pacific was absent, which I found curious given that this was a time of Cold War tension, of Star Wars experimentation within the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands or TTPI (on Kwajalein Atoll), of feared Soviet expansion into the northern Pacific, and of course the Reagan presidency much focused on that sort of thing. There seemed to be very little sign of any broader US interest in the localities themselves other than the massive US base at Kwajalein, for whose occupation the local population had been squeezed onto Ebeye islet.

By the mid-1980s, the US Department of Defense had largely signed off on involvement, other than in the broadest strategic sense. This was because it had successfully overseen the drafting and acceptance locally (for the locals, on the 'best available' principle) of the Compacts of Free Association. This guaranteed US dominance of the whole region, protected US defence and strategic interests, provided for any future US military activity, strictly limited Micronesians' future diplomatic flexibility, and excluded any other state from trying to do anything in the region which

the United States did not approve of. Nobody else was taking much interest anyway. Thus satisfied, Defense tended to sit back, keep to its immediate interests (Kwajalein mainly), and leave the TTPI's daily business to the Department of the Interior.

However, if the American administration was largely uninterested in its territories, there was a group of others who certainly were very interested. These were a raft of businessmen, some distinctly shady, from Taiwan, the Philippines, South Korea and Japan. They could see excellent prospects for offshore business, including tourism (Palau) but also logging and drug trafficking. Their preferred modus operandi was to recruit local political leaders where they could, sign special private deals, pay money and exploit the political leaders. It is a credit to so many of the local leaders that in many cases they stood strongly against these attempts at special deals and outright corruption. But they could see few other paths to development: their children were going away to third-rate US universities and then emigrating — another benefit of the Compacts — and little serious development interest was coming in. A future linked to the shadier side of east Asian businesses seemed unavoidable.

What struck me most, given my South Pacific backgrounding, was that while objectively the Micronesians shared essentially the same issues and problems of smallness, neglect and isolation of their South Pacific counterparts, witness especially their ethnic cousins in Kiribati, there was hardly any awareness within Micronesia of this complementarity, nor even of the existence of a commonality of interests with those south of the equator. It seemed to me especially regrettable that the Micronesians knew nothing about regional forums like the South Pacific Forum itself, the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA), the South Pacific Bureau for Economic Co-operation or even the South Pacific Community (SPC — of which they were actually members, if largely inactive).

With Micronesia having now achieved its post-Compact plebiscites, even though in form and reality still the TTPI, and therefore on the beginnings of the road to (a sort of) independence, I believed that Australia should and could make an effort to draw the attention of the Micronesian leadership to the prospects of further cooperation with and indeed participation in the existing regional institutions. I hoped that this would both aid in their handling of many of the same issues which their counterparts south of the equator had faced and

were still facing, and also provide them with a broader range of options than the very narrow, if sometimes superficially rather appealing ones held before them by their self-promoting business contacts or the one-way exits which America offered, which did not take much interest in Micronesia's own national priorities.

I took this up with all three presidents during this my first visit. I said I would send to them regularly the more interesting and relevant communications we ourselves had from the SPC, the FFA and, wherever we could, from the jewel in the group, the Forum itself. When I got back to Honolulu, I set up a system of personal letters to each of the presidents and waited to see if any took root. I was fortunate in Honolulu to be considered a 'Pacific' post, and so I received the full range of our Pacific reporting. I used it extensively.

I was therefore delighted to find on my next visit to Micronesia that these reports had indeed stimulated a great deal of interest. In FSM especially, the president, Tosiwo Nakayama, was most interested, had clearly read all the reports and quizzed me closely on the whole question of the regional organisations. The Marshall Islands president, Amata Kabua, was also interested, if more immediately preoccupied with pressing local political problems — Bikini's future, nuclear testing compensation clauses, Kwajalein refugees, various Compact provisions unique to the Marshalls — but even here he had read and absorbed the material, and especially those parts relating to Kiribati, as the Marshalls' closest island relative. Palau took longer to catch on, but did do so by the end of my time (and I suspect at the prompting of FSM, by now quite enthusiastic).

I concentrated particularly on talking about the South Pacific Forum, as it was then called, because, as the meeting place of prime ministers and presidents, that is where real power lay and where the Micronesians would get firsthand experience of and friendship with their Pacific counterparts. As we know in the Pacific, it's the personal contacts that count. I thought that if we could interest the South Pacific leaders in what was happening in the north, that would be a source of strength and support for the Micronesians in their own rather fraught dealings with the outside world, both commercial and political.

I therefore kept up a stream of material from our own sources, and believe that these were the impetus in the decisions by each of the Micronesian states, once they had the United States' authority to proceed with

some of their own foreign policy decisions, to apply first and foremost for membership of the Forum. This was achieved in 1987, a first for them and a triumph of regional diplomacy.

While things were progressing well on the Micronesian side, the same could not be said about the fundamental issue of achieving the termination of the US Strategic Trusteeship and the accession of the three states to a form of independence. As far as I could determine, the two issues here were a) inaction on the part of the US Department of the Interior as the 'colonial' power in encouraging any sort of further political progress for Micronesia, and b) apprehension in the State Department over how to get an appropriate resolution through the UN Security Council in the face of a possible Soviet veto — see below.

Interestingly, there was no pushback at all from the Department of Defense, which was, after all, the one organisation with a profound interest in the future of Micronesia and the one most prepared to prevent anything it thought might jeopardise US defence interests there. In Honolulu I had good relations with the commander in chief of Pacific Command (CINCPAC), Admiral Crowe. Crowe was an extremely far-sighted man, later to become chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington. He had an excellent appreciation of where the United States' strategic interests lay and what did or did not need to be worried over. I had several discussions with him about the future of Micronesia; I pointed out, and he agreed, that the United States had already covered all its strategic needs in the Compacts and thus its future interests were assured. I said that we believed that it was now important for the Micronesians to be better anchored in a friendly – and unthreatening – like-minded community for its future diplomatic links, and that such a community existed already in the South Pacific which was open to the Micronesians to join and participate fully, indeed hopefully to the exclusion of some other and worse things. I also noted that Australia was itself a full member of all these organisations and could of course be relied upon to act helpfully and responsibly. I was supported in my case by the political advisors to CINCPAC, both very senior State Department officials, John Helble and later Carl Jenkins, whose job it was/is to keep the Command up to date with broad US political interests as seen by State. Crowe gave his tick, Defense in Washington accepted his endorsement, and the path to Micronesian

membership of the Forum in 1987, just about their first international act as new states, was trouble free.

Not so, however, the final passage through the Congress, and then the United Nations (UN). The passage through Congress was not a high-profile matter, quite the reverse, hampered as it was by the lack of interest of the relevant sponsoring organisation, the Department of the Interior.

As negotiations within Congress stumbled along through 1986 it seemed to me that the whole Micronesia enterprise might fall off the rails entirely, just due to Congressional lack of motivation to pass the relevant legislation. I was able to make several visits to Washington during this period, and supported by two particularly able officers in the embassy, we called on various relevant congressmen and staffers, making much the same arguments as to Defense before, stressing perhaps most that a 'natural' international environment for the Micronesians could be found with us in the South Pacific institutions, a region almost entirely democratic. That surely was an outcome which most suited long-term US interests, we argued. State and Defense departments were supportive, rather to the surprise of Interior, and in the end even Interior did not resist, with the Compacts passing through Congress in 1986.

The UN angle was quite tricky. All other UN Trusteeships came under the Trusteeship Council, containing all the regular members of the UN. It therefore had a strongly anti-colonial ethos. Reaching the end of a trusteeship and accession to independence was never a problem or even an issue, unless of course the administering power did not actually want to grant independence. But the US Trusteeship in Micronesia was unique in that at American insistence in 1947 it was placed in a separate category of its own as a Strategic Trusteeship, and not under the Trusteeship Council but the UN Security Council (UNSC). That meant that any resolution could be subject to a Soviet veto. This aspect caused concern at the State Department: what would be the consequences if the United States duly requested the UNSC to terminate the TTPI but the Soviets vetoed it? Would the Micronesians and the United States be stuck in diplomatic, political and legal limbo for years? We supported a solution whereby the draft resolution to the UNSC would be cast grammatically in the negative, so that the Soviets, if they did indeed want to make trouble (this was

indeed the height of the Cold War after all), would be in the position of having to get their own majority to actually defeat a resolution on granting independence.

That idea seemed to work, but officials in State then needed to ensure that the resolution gained a substantial majority among the 15 UNSC members. A concerted diplomatic round of consultations took

place in New York and the United States was finally convinced that it could indeed get the resolution through and with a large majority — but not until late 1990 (with the ending of the Cold War). In the event, only Cuba voted against — not an issue as far as the United States was concerned.

The Historical Context of Decolonising American Micronesia

Stewart Firth

This Working Paper illuminates a number of issues in Pacific history, seen through the lens of the decolonisation that took place in Micronesia in the 1980s and 1990s. Bill Fisher's personal account throws light on the nature and extent of Pacific decolonisation; the influence of the Cold War; and Australia's role in expanding Pacific regionalism to include the newly independent states in Micronesia.

While all decolonising powers, even the United Kingdom, recognised the strategic dimension of their departure from the Pacific, none equated the process with their own strategic interests as much as the Americans. The United States had no intention of abandoning the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands that it had administered since the 1940s: the Northern Marianas, Palau, the Caroline Islands and the Marshall Islands. These sparsely populated islands, won in battle from the Japanese at the cost of thousands of lives, formed a strategic belt across the region from the US state of Hawai'i to the Philippines and Okinawa, one that the Americans were determined to keep.

The Americans inherited the six districts administered by Japan since 1914: Marshalls, Pohnpei, Chuuk, Yap, Palau and the Northern Mariana Islands and governed them as the US Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, the world's only 'strategic trust', permitting the administering authority to close off the region to other countries and to conduct military experiments. It was under the terms of this unique form of trust territory that the United States conducted nuclear weapons tests at Bikini and Enewetak atolls in 1946–58, and began testing missiles at Kwajalein Atoll in the early 1960s. The 'strategic trust' held by the Americans could not be terminated by a vote in the

UN General Assembly as other Trust Territories could but, as Bill Fisher emphasises, only by a vote of the UN Security Council. Far more than any other decolonising country in the Pacific, the former Japanese territories were deeply entwined with the military activities, existing or planned, of the departing colonial power, to the extent that some Micronesians wondered whether it was departing at all.

American policy towards the Micronesians in the 1950s and 1960s has been compared to keeping subject people in a zoo. As Carl Heine, a prominent Marshallese leader, wrote in 1969:

Till recently, the concept of Micronesia as a 'zoo' or 'museum' flourished, as a consequence of the official policy of keeping the people within the boundaries of their islands. The few students who were so fortunate as to go abroad for study were limited to a two-year program and were forced to return to the Trust Territory at the end of that period. Ordinary citizens and businessmen were not encouraged to travel; obtaining a passport was very difficult. This policy has now been somewhat modified. But its imposition in the past has crippled Micronesia by denying its people the chance to learn and gain wider horizons by visiting the world around them (Heine 1969).

Robert C. Kiste, who dedicated his life to the study of Micronesia and the wider Pacific, thought this was too generous a formulation of American policy. The Americans in his view were not interested in preserving traditional cultures, but merely in keeping the north Pacific insular region safe for the US Department of Defense (Kiste 1986).

The Micronesians took action on their future political status by establishing the Congress of Micronesia in 1965, and negotiations over their future status with the United States began in 1969. But the six districts did not reflect the separate languages,

identities and cultures of the region, and in the 1970s the island groups split into four entities: the Northern Marianas opted to stay with the United States and became a commonwealth; the Federated States of Micronesia adopted its own constitution in 1978, while the Marshall Islands and Palau adopted constitutions in 1979. These would become the Commonwealth and the three freely associated countries we know today. The Congress of Micronesia's Future Political Status Commission considered three options: independence, free association, and integration with the United States. They opted in the end for free association, at a time when the Cook Islands had recently entered into free association with New Zealand (Kiste 1986).

'Free association', however, meant one thing in the Cook Islands and quite another in Micronesia. 'Free association' in the Cook Islands is assumed rather than spelled out, the Cook Islanders are free to declare independence at any time, and they are New Zealand citizens living in part of the Realm of New Zealand. The Micronesian kind of free association negotiated in the 1970s and 1980s is quite different: the people of Palau, the FSM and the Marshalls are not US citizens and their countries are not regarded as part of the United States, but Washington has a veto on their political status, and their 'decolonisation' is prescribed in Compacts of Free Association, which are hundreds of pages long, together with subsidiary agreements governing every aspect of future military access.

At stake for the Americans was not only exclusive military access to every part of this atoll region, delineated in detail in the Compacts of Free Association, but the right to occupy and utilise specific military sites such as the US Army Space and Missile Defense Command's Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site at Kwajalein, the largest atoll in the world, and central to the development of American missiles since the 1960s. As Barrie Macdonald pointed out in 1986, the 'draft compact provides for massive financial assistance and for severe constraints on future Micronesian options' (Macdonald 1986:120).

Here Fisher makes the penetrating point that the defence planners and diplomats responsible for the future of Micronesia tended to think of the 'Pacific Islands' as those that stretched west from Hawai'i to the Philippines. Their gaze was not south to the region where nine independent Island states had emerged. More significantly, Micronesian leaders also operated in an American universe — looking east to Washington,

where the money came from, and west to other parts of the American Pacific such as Guam. Yet by 1980 all the key Pacific Island countries were to be found wholly or in part south of the equator. Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Samoa, Tonga, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Nauru were independent, and were organising and cooperating in a new regionalism that their Pacific cousins in American Micronesia knew little about.

The old Pacific regionalism revolved around the South Pacific Commission formed in 1947 by the colonial powers Australia, Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, France and the United States. The United States added their Pacific territories in 1951, but, as Fisher points out, their leaders in the 1980s were hardly aware of the fact.

The new regionalism arose from the achievement of independence or free association by Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, Cook Islands and Nauru, which together formed the South Pacific Forum in 1971. The Forum was an expression of self-determination in regional affairs and it expanded through the 1970s as more Pacific countries gained independence: Papua New Guinea in 1975, Tuvalu and Solomon Islands in 1978, Kiribati in 1979 and Vanuatu in 1980, with Niue entering free association with New Zealand in 1973. Australia and New Zealand were members from the start. The annual Forum meetings of Pacific prime ministers and presidents soon became a key barometer of Pacific concerns, while the South Pacific Commission, later renamed the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, focused on the technical dimensions of development.

French nuclear testing united the newly independent Forum countries. In 1975 the South Pacific Forum backed New Zealand in favouring a South Pacific nuclear-free zone. The French continued their nuclear weapons tests at Moruroa Atoll regardless, provoking almost universal condemnation. Then in 1985 they sent secret agents to sink the Greenpeace organisation's vessel *Rainbow Warrior*, which anchored in Auckland before a planned visit to the French test site in French Polynesia. One Greenpeace activist was killed. The revelation that France would use its secret service against an environmental organisation in New Zealand was an international scandal that powerfully influenced Pacific Islanders' negative attitudes to France.

Concerned that the region's anti-nuclearism might, in the end, undermine the ANZUS Treaty, Australia led the initiative to negotiate a South Pacific Nuclear Free

Zone as a regional expression of opposition to a legacy of French nuclear tests and the dumping of nuclear waste. Issues like these were part of a common history with parts of Micronesia, where the Americans had left a legacy of nuclear contamination in the Marshall Islands, and where Palau included a 'nuclear-free' clause in its constitution of 1979, a clause which delayed agreement between Palau and the United States on free association until the 1990s.

The United States advised the UN Trusteeship Council at its meeting in New York in May 1986 that its trusteeship in Micronesia should be terminated, having begun formal negotiations over a new political status in 1969. The process, still not finished, was the longest set of independence negotiations in the Pacific region and the most subject to strategic and military considerations. The Cold War stood in the way of a new political status for the Trust Territory islands because termination of the trusteeship depended on a vote in the UN Security Council. That is why it was not until 1990, with the Berlin Wall demolished and the Cold War at an end, that the constituent parts of the Trust Territory could become freely associated states, in the case of the Marshall Islands and the FSM, or a commonwealth as in the case of the Northern Marianas. By Resolution 683 of 1990, the Security Council determined that 'in the light of the entry into force of the new status agreements for the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands and the Northern Mariana Islands, that the objectives of the Trusteeship Agreement have been fully attained, and that the applicability of the Trusteeship Agreement has terminated, with respect to those entities' (UNSC 1990).

That still left Palau under American administration because of the nuclear-free clause in its 1979 constitution which the Americans did not want. It provided that 'nuclear, chemical, gas or biological weapons intended for use in warfare ... shall not be used, tested, stored or disposed of within the territorial jurisdiction of Palau without the express approval of not less than three-fourths of the votes cast in a referendum submitted on this specific question' (CCP 20/7/2020:19). The same 75 per cent hurdle applied to the vote on the Compact of Free Association. The Palauans voted on this nuclear-free issue repeatedly before voting to require only a simple majority to change the constitution (*Washington Post* 2/10/1994). It was a case of Washington requiring the people of this new Pacific democracy to vote the right way in order to gain freedom of association. After

a further plebiscite in 1993 approving free association, the UN Security Council found that 'the objectives of the Trusteeship Agreement have been fully attained, and that the applicability of the Trusteeship Agreement has terminated with respect to Palau' (UNSC 1994).

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