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Macro Issues in Micronesia

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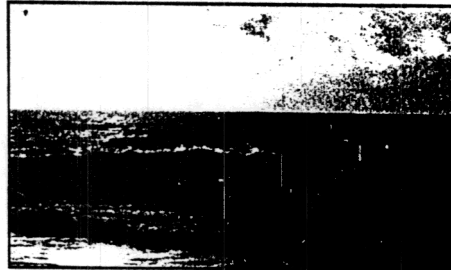
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Will the U.S. government once again confound itself by being blind to its own cultural assumptions? That is what happened the last time it engaged in negotiations with the peoples of Micronesia, a region of small island states and big budgets in the Western Pacific. Will the Micronesians be able to identify and protect their interests in negotiations with the most powerful state the world has yet produced? There is a strong case to be made that they were less than successful the last time around. Will the new international political arrangement known as free association evolve into an alternative to international charity in the relations of weak poor nations with large rich ones? Further, is there a chance that this arrangement can offer a creative future to societies torn by center-region conflicts? And how large a gap can there be between *de jure* sovereignty and *de facto* dependence? These questions make the upcoming talks between the Micronesian nations and the United States important to those interested in conflict analysis and resolution.

In the year 2001 important clauses of the Compacts of Free Association between the United States and the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) and the United States and the Republic of the Marshall Islands are scheduled to expire. These documents structure the relationship between these new nations, called Freely Associated States, and the United States, their former administering power. If all goes well, the clauses will be replaced with successfully negotiated, mutually acceptable agreements that may then serve as models for similarly scheduled talks over the future of the Compact of Free Association between the United States and the Republic of Palau, another Micronesian nation that recently emerged out of the former United States Trust Territory of the Pacific

Islands. The Marshalls' deadline is October 21, 2001 and the FSM's is November 3, 2001, while the Palau Compact runs in its entirety until October 1, 2044, although its funding ceases for the most part after 2009.

While the three Freely Associated States, known as island microstates, possess very small populations and land areas, their territorial waters and related exclusive economic zones cover a significant portion of the Pacific west of Hawaii. As member states of the United Nations, the Micronesians achieved internationally recognized independence under the auspices of laboriously negotiated Compacts of Free Association, complex agreements that assign military and limited



foreign policy rights to the United States in exchange for significant budgetary and program support.

U.S. strategic and foreign policy interests in this region have changed since the negotiation of the Compacts, but they have not evaporated. Micronesian reliance on U.S. funds has, if anything, increased over the course of the Compacts. Hence, the importance of the upcoming talks to both sides. Beneath the mask of official discourse, with its fiction that somehow the United States and its former wards are equivalent actors, each able to articulate and defend its interests, is a bargaining process framed in the metaphors of the power holders.

Further, these metaphors, and the cultural assumptions that inform them, are in

a sense invisible to those deploying them. This blindness is one of the factors that made the numerous rounds of status negotiations held between the United States and the Micronesians during the 1970s and 1980s so protracted and difficult. ["Culture, Power and International Negotiations: Understanding Palau-U.S. Status Negotiations," P. Black and K. Avruch. *Millennium*, 1993, Vol. 22, pp. 379-400].

The American side just never seemed to notice that its metaphors for describing what was going on were just that, metaphors or figures of speech and not real analyses. Given the realities of Micronesia, the predictive power of those metaphors was weak and their explanatory utility even weaker. All they really did was prevent the Americans from noticing the metaphors being used by the Micronesians.

A review of documents produced by various American officials anticipating the imminent talks indicates that things have not improved much, if at all. Further, the nearly complete turnover of personnel on the American side since the earlier negotiations means that it is unlikely that anyone who did learn that lesson will still be involved. Institutional amnesia (bordering on dementia) will be something the Micronesians will have to contend with. They will also have to make sense of, and turn to their own advantage if they can, the cultural assumptions the representatives of these very powerful institutions bring to the talks, many of which have a quasi-messianic quality to them.

Contemporary official American thinking about Micronesia can be instructively compared to an earlier involvement in the Pacific. Nineteenth century American whalers, beachcombers, and traders were important in transforming Pacific island societies, but none more so than missionaries. Moreover, the missionaries



and the islands were morally significant beacons to the American reading public, which learned about them from the popular press of the day. Today, in official discourse about the upcoming talks, there is no trace of that earlier concern for Micronesian souls, at least at the overt level. Yet much of the fervor about free market economic development with minimal state involvement echoes that earlier discourse of spiritual salvation. What will the Micronesians make of it?

The Micronesians of today are, as a group, highly educated, well-traveled, and intimately familiar with American society—its political culture, consumer products, and mass media. They make their homes on small, remote islands that have been recast into American-modeled representative democracies based on written constitutions and elaborate legal systems, to which has been exported much of mainland consumer culture sustained by massive transfer payments. Yet much of the ancient cultural pattern remains vital: kin-based social organization, an ethic of sharing, and a very high value placed on land are as characteristic of the Micronesian way of life today as they were when Magellan first crossed the horizon. One struggle the Micronesian negotiators will face is to produce agreements which, at a minimum, do not serve to erode those values. Can this be done within the rhetoric of the economics department of the University of Chicago?

Americans captured Micronesia from Japan in World War II in battles of extraordinary ferocity. In the years since the war, first the U.S. Navy and then the Department of the Interior administered the islands—the successors to a long chain of colonial masters. While Spain, Germany, and then Japan also left their marks on Micronesia, America's postwar Pacific trusteeship, with its New Frontier and its Great Society programs, has had the greatest impact. The Compacts themselves, with their millions and millions in U.S. grant aid, have played a major role in creating and sustaining dependence. The amount, duration, and conditions for future payments will be a major item on the negotiators' agendas.

Beyond the specific interests of the parties, there are more general reasons why these talks are worth attention—the negotiators will have to address, directly or indirectly, fundamental questions of sovereignty, security, and interstate relations, both in the Pacific and generally. Further, like the negotiations that led up to the Compacts, these talks will challenge the Americans to respect and adhere to their own ideology, while challenging the Micronesians to achieve their interests in a context not of their making. This will be difficult to achieve in any event, but most particularly if the parties remain oblivious to their own and each other's cultural assumptions.

Sovereignty and its limits is a perennially important issue and, as more and more formerly dependent and encapsulated peoples struggle to take their place in the world arena, it hardly seems likely to lessen in importance. Free association may offer a new sovereign status, and a possible future alternative to the historical systems of internal oppression, informal client-patron relations, and unacceptable colonial arrangements that in the past have structured relations within and between powerful and weak societies. Perhaps, too, it can structure a relationship in which both sides can come to see and understand their own and the other's cultural assumptions.

Micronesian demographic and geographic realities combine with the limitations written into the Compacts to make the imagination of sovereignty, at least as much as the imagination of community, the major challenge to the political mind in this part of the world. The negotiations which now loom so large in the politics of Micronesia, and so small in the politics of Washington, will, if nothing else, test imaginations in both places. ■