

# On Essential Islands

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In 2018, at the invitation of the college there, I traveled to the Federated States of Micronesia (“FSM”) to screen a documentary that I had made called *Island Soldier*. The film explores the service of Micronesian citizens in the United States armed services during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.<sup>1</sup> As I arrived in the islands, bleary from my long flight (more than twenty hours of travel with layovers), the United States Peace Corps program was about to end after 60 years of continuous operation. The program has long been a visible symbol of the relationship between independent countries in the Western Pacific. A few days after I arrived, I spoke to Peace Corps Volunteer Sorchia Vaughan as she was preparing a farewell speech that she would be delivering to the state legislature and governor to close out the program on the island of Kosrae. Sorchia said, “There’s no way to say thank you to every single person on this island who ever worked with a Peace Corps Volunteer. Because, I mean, I’d be talking to almost the whole island.” As a former Peace Corps Volunteer in Micronesia myself, I can attest to the truth of Sorchia’s point. Sorchia told me that the week before I had arrived, recruiters from the U.S. military had been on island at the local high school where she taught to administer the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (“ASVAB”) admission test to about a hundred students. There was a bleak symbolism to this moment that felt like a metaphor for a longstanding and complex relationship between Micronesia and the United States: islanders ready to leave home to enlist in the U.S. Military at a moment when U.S. citizens would no longer be traveling to Micronesia to support young countries with development and education.

The Peace Corps program was established in Micronesia in 1967, twenty years after the region had first been placed under the United States’ trust by the United Nations in 1947.<sup>2</sup> Previously, Micronesia had undergone

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<sup>1</sup> ISLAND SOLDIER (Atoll Pictures; Pacific Islanders in Communications; Humanities Guåhan; Meerkat Media 2017).

<sup>2</sup> LIN POYER ET AL., MICRONESIAN EXPERIENCES OF THE WAR IN THE PACIFIC 390 (Univ. Haw. Press, 1st ed. 2000); see also Craig J. Severance, *Being Better Americans and Doing It For Them: The Peace Corps in Micronesia*, (Univ. Haw. Conference Paper, 1984)

periods of colonial rule by Spain, Germany, and Japan, ending in the bloody battles of World War II. Beginning in 1969, the U.S. and Micronesia began to engage in formal negotiations on the territory's future political status.<sup>3</sup> Self-determination was an important tenet of these discussion, especially emerging from a period in the early 1960s when the U.S. was sharply criticized for creating a "Rust Territory" in the region and failing to uphold its responsibilities to develop adequate systems for education and economic development in the islands.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in a notorious document called the Solomon Report drafted in 1963, an "integrated master plan for action" recommended "Winning the plebiscite and making Micronesia a United States territory under circumstances which will: (1) satisfy somewhat conflicting interests of the Micronesians, the UN, and the US along lines satisfactory to the [U.S.] congress."<sup>5</sup> The report was uncovered by a Palauan journalism student and described by the publication *The Young Micronesian* as "a ruthless five-year plan to systematically Americanize Micronesia into a permanent association in clear and conscious defiance of its trusteeship obligations".<sup>6</sup> Instead of choosing to become a U.S. territory, the island nations in Micronesia chose independence, and, by 1982 and 1983 respectively, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau had all entered into agreements with the United States called the Compact of Free Association (COFA).<sup>7</sup>

By the time I arrived in Micronesia in 2004 to commence my Peace Corps service, the second world war (WWII) had been over for nearly sixty years. Yet, reminders of the war were still present on the islands in the form of rusted canons draped in vines, concrete bunkers slouching into the ocean, and war ships encrusted with colorful coral scaffolding in the clear waters. My grandfather, Frank Fitch II, sailed through Micronesia in 1945 while serving in the Marines on the way to fight in the battle of Iwo Jima, where he was shot in the heart with a piece of shrapnel. He survived, but his story is just one example of the sacrifices of WWII, not the least of which were suffered by Micronesians. Among the things that I remember being most

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at 64-67.

<sup>3</sup> DONALD F. MCHENRY, *MICRONESIA: TRUST BETRAYED* 194 (Carnegie Endowment for Int'l Peace 1975).

<sup>4</sup> See Greg Dvorak, 28 *THE CONTEMPORARY PACIFIC* 248-251 (2016).

<sup>5</sup> U.S. GOVERNMENT SURVEY MISSION TO THE TRUST TERRITORY OF THE PACIFIC ISLANDS: REPORT TO THE PRESIDENT (A. Solomon, Oct. 9, 1963) (emphasis added).

<sup>6</sup> MCHENRY, *supra* note 3, at 19 (quoting *The "Solomon Report" Is Bared! America's Ruthless Blueprint to Colonize & Annex Micronesia*, 1 *The Young Micronesian*, (March 1971).

<sup>7</sup> See COMPACT OF FREE ASSOCIATION, MICR.-U.S., H.R. Doc. No. 98-192 (1982); COMPACT OF FREE ASSOCIATION, MARSH. IS.-U.S., H.R. Doc. No. 98-192 (1982); COMPACT OF FREE ASSOCIATION, PALAU-U.S., H.R. Doc. No. 98-192 (1986).

startled by in my first few weeks living in Micronesia were the signs of patriotism to the United States that abounded in the form of American flags and veteran bumper stickers on rusty flatbed trucks.<sup>8</sup> I found that a dichotomy existed in my experience in Micronesia, a place at once startlingly different yet also strangely familiar. For instance, the U.S. dollar is used throughout the region, yet on the island of Yap you can still see giant limestone disks of stone money that were traditionally used as currency. I recall hearing a story of a confused banker when a village chief stopped in to ascertain the value of his village's stock of stone money in USD. Could he get a loan?

Each year a holiday called "*Liberation Day*" is celebrated across Micronesia to remember the arrival of American troops in 1944. In the book *The Typhoon of War*, this moment in the Marshall Islands was described as follows: "Americans appeared to be powerful enough to protect them from the Japanese military and generous enough to supply all that was so desperately lacking. Nearly everyone in the region remembers their first experiences with American troops as overwhelmingly anxious, yet ultimately positive."<sup>9</sup> In a series of interviews I collected on the island of Kosrae in 2010 for a project,<sup>10</sup> I was repeatedly told of a Japanese plot to kill off the population of the island in a cave with explosives. The plan was narrowly averted by a sympathetic Japanese officer. For older islanders, the memories from this period seem to keep the country's connection to the U.S. strong.

For a younger generation of Micronesians who I came to know during my time in the Peace Corps from 2004-06, the United States was embodied by shiny cars, fast food, and lavish homes as seen on TV screens.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, the island economies were sluggish with low minimum wages for those lucky enough to get a job at all.<sup>12</sup> While their parents may have enjoyed scholarships and travel opportunities at a moment when U.S. funding was more generous in the 1960-70s, the young people who I knew saw employment opportunities abroad as their best option to support themselves and their families.

I made trips to the FSM regularly for a series of projects between 2010–2018 and observed that U.S. investment and support for the islands seemed to be waning. People spoke glumly of a trust fund that had been set up to support the islands when U.S. funding for the second Compact of Free Association was set to expire in 2024, but no one seemed very optimistic

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<sup>8</sup> ISLAND SOLDIER, *supra* note 1.

<sup>9</sup> Poyer et al., *supra* note 2, at 238 (emphasis added).

<sup>10</sup> IMPACT ON AN ISLAND (Nathan Fitch 2011).

<sup>11</sup> TV was introduced to Micronesia in the 1980s.

<sup>12</sup> The minimum wage in Kosrae was 50 cents per hour in 2005.

that it would be enough to maintain the young countries' governments and economies. Meanwhile, the Chinese presence in the islands seemed to be increasing, visible in public works construction projects like high schools or a new bridge. Island leaders told of offers made to them to educate their children for free in elite private schools in mainland China.

In my research for a new project that I am developing with the podcast host Angela Edward, I continue to find the word “essential” used to describe the islands and its people. Capturing the region was essential to U.S. victory in WWII, leading to a period of American global economic dominance.<sup>13</sup> Starting in 1946, the U.S. military produced films about the nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands and repeatedly deemed it “essential” for the good of mankind that Bikini atoll be sacrificed at the altar of military testing. However, by 1975 when the book *Trust Betrayed* by Donald F. McHenry was published, the narrative became clear that the “Islands remain useful for weapons and storage, but they are not essential.”<sup>14</sup> At the height of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, when it had become very difficult to convince U.S. citizens to enlist, recruiters were able to enroll Micronesians to play an essential if deadly role in the U.S. military (many serving in the infantry).<sup>15</sup> Most recently, during the COVID-19 global pandemic, many COFA citizens risked and lost their lives serving as essential workers in the meatpacking industry, elder care, and associated jobs. Despite paying taxes, this group of COFA migrant workers were not eligible for benefits such as Medicaid since the enactment of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) to the end of 2020.<sup>16</sup>

Taking a historical perspective, it is perhaps not surprising that there is a pendulum nature to the value with which islands are considered on a global scale. While it is perhaps new to a general lexicon, brought to the forefront by COVID-19, “essential” is a word that has long been used in the context of the islands of Micronesia. While they are small in landmass, Micronesia encompasses a vast swath of the Pacific and has long been viewed by foreign powers as pivotal in the geopolitics of global power and empire. In the summer of 2021, I was mesmerized as the news of the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban spread. A world away from Micronesia, my

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<sup>13</sup> See Thomas Hart Armbruster, *A Closer Look at the US-Marshall Islands Relationship*, COUNCIL AM. AMBASSADORS (2015), <https://www.americanambassadors.org/publications/ambassadors-review/spring-2015/a-closer-look-at-the-us-marshall-islands-relationship>.

<sup>14</sup> McHenry, *supra* note 3, at 84.

<sup>15</sup> See Sofya Aptekar, *Recruiters' Paradise*, CRITICAL ETHNIC & CMTY. STUD. (April 17, 2023, 11:02 PM), <https://blogs.umb.edu/cecsprogram/2017/11/20/recruiters-paradise/>.

<sup>16</sup> Fabricio J. Alarcon, *The Migrant Crisis and Access to Health Care*, DEL. J. OF PUB. HEALTH (2022), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9621574/>.

project *Island Soldier* had taken me to Afghanistan on an embed with Micronesian troops in the U.S. Army, and I drew surprising connections: Two countries with important strategic geographies in which the United States has long exercised power for political purposes in a military context. The results of U.S. involvement and the hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan are clear and horrifying.

As we approach the end of the second round of Compact funding, and negotiations are underway between the U.S. and the Marshall Islands, Palau, and the FSM, there is much to consider against a convulsive geopolitical landscape and the backdrop of the looming threat of climate change. The family whom I lived with as a Peace Corps volunteer nearly twenty years ago have mostly migrated to the U.S., and many of them are working as essential workers today in food services and the military. While the United States is surely calculating based on the present and future “essential” nature of the Islands in the context of China and control of the Pacific, I wonder if we can move beyond a colonial framework?

What is essential to who, and for what end? How often do the people and places that are deemed “essential” benefit from the moniker? Can essential be subverted into a two-way street?

Beyond any short term political strategic interest on either side, we know that the health of our oceans and islands are vital to our continued survival as a species. Surely that is the most essential thing to consider in these high-stakes negotiations and an ongoing relationship.