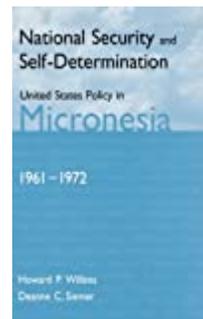




Howard Willens, Deanne Siemer. *National Security and Self-Determination: United States Policy in Micronesia (1961-1972)*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2000. ix+312 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-96914-1.



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Howard Willens and Deanne Siemer, two attorneys-turned-historians, have produced an erudite and highly detailed work on an obscure but fascinating episode of American colonial history.

In 1945, the United States entered into possession of all Imperial Japan's former Pacific Island possessions. The former Micronesian Mandate, now the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, was the largest colonial possession in the world; it stretched across forty degrees of longitude, and covered an area larger than all Europe west of Russia. This immense area was, of course, mostly water. Still, Micronesia included four major archipelagoes, several hundred islands, and at least six distinct languages and cultures.

As Trustee, the United States had to balance its strategic interests – real and perceived – against the pressing, indeed desperate, needs of the islanders. The dilemma was common to all colonial powers, of course, but the American situation in Micronesia had some wholly unique characteristics. No other colonial power paid as much lip service to liberty and equality. No other colony was as large, as sparsely populated, and as isolated. And nowhere else was colonial administration, and the subsequent decolonization process, so thoroughly muddled by competing bureaucratic interests.

Three different American bureaucracies had interests in the islands. The Department of Defense considered Micronesia a vital part of American grand strategy, and was determined to keep it available for bases and weapons testing. The military wanted the United States to exercise “unrestricted control” over the region – meaning, in practice, either integration into the US or continuation of the status quo. The Department of State saw the Trust Territory as a minor but persistent diplomatic complication. Under the Trust Agreement, the United States was answerable to the United Nations for its administration of the region. In the 1950s, this meant little more than rare, highly ceremonial, visits to the Territory from representatives of the UN Trusteeship Council, plus the occasional pot-shot from the Soviets about “imperialism”.

As the '50s gave way to the '60s, though, the mood at the UN began to change. The General Assembly steadily grew with the addition of newly independent post-colonial states. These new members were much less inclined to let the Americans run Micronesia as they pleased. Furthermore, the other UN Trust Territories were gradually maturing to independence or some other resolution of their status. As the number of Trust Territories dwindled, the continuing American administration of Micronesia came to seem more and more aberrant. The State Department, keenly sensitive to this, wanted

the Micronesian issue resolved in the least embarrassing manner possible.

Finally, the Department of the Interior had to be satisfied. Interior seems to have considered Micronesia as something between an Indian reservation and an enormous national park. Tasked with the administration of the region, Interior was at first largely comfortable with the status quo. The Territory's obvious and continuing deficiencies in education, health, and general development, though, would gradually lead Interior towards a policy of "expanded stewardship" – in essence, a bureaucratic model of top-down development, which not incidentally would involve a larger budget and more responsibility for Interior.

Meanwhile, the Micronesians themselves were divided. All agreed that the islands needed more investment and more development. The islands' political future, however, was deeply muddled. Micronesia, unlike most colonies, never formed a single party with a clear pro-independence ideology. This was partly because of the huge distances between the islands, and their disparate languages and cultures. But it was also because the islanders themselves were divided on the independence issue. Many Micronesians wanted full independence, but many others desired some sort of continuing relationship with the United States. And one island group – the Northern Marianas – was determined to have some sort of political union with the United States, even if it meant breaking away from the rest of Micronesia to do it.

This last issue was particularly fraught. Since 1945, all colonial powers had rigorously adhered to the principle of *uti possidetis*, the rule that colonies should, upon receiving their independence, maintain precisely the same boundaries as under colonial rule. Despite the doctrine's obvious inequities, there was nearly universal belief that departing from *uti possidetis* would lead to dangerous instability at best, civil war at worst. After all, the few exceptions to date – the divisions of Korea, Vietnam, and British India – had all been accompanied by massive bloodshed. There would, therefore, be considerable reluctance to even consider allowing the Northern Marianas to negotiate a separate status from the other Micronesians.

By the early 1960s, then, there were no less than seven competing "shareholders" in the debate over Micronesian status: the two factions among the Micronesians, the Departments of State, Interior, and Defense, the United States Congress, and the United Nations. When

strong executive leadership on the issue was absent (and it usually was; no President would ever visit Micronesia, and none after Kennedy would express more than the vaguest passing interest in it), the various interest groups would find it painfully difficult to shape policy. In the end, they would have to find their way to agreement through negotiation, diplomacy, and the occasional episode of arm-twisting and bullying. The resulting political wrangle lasted for a quarter of a century. Willens and Siemer lay out the first half of it – up to the key decision, in 1972, to allow the division of the Trust Territory – in meticulous detail (a second book, expected next year, will describe the consequences of that decision).

The casual reader will probably find the first chapter (which sets the stage) and the last two (which describe the resolution) the most interesting; these are the fastest moving. In between, though, the authors take the reader through painstakingly detailed negotiations between the various players, step by step. The process is complicated as Presidential administrations come and go and Congressional leadership shifts; keeping track of the various players can be difficult. It's worth the read, however, for a fascinating portrait of the policy-making process at its most complex.

The level of detail is almost intimidating. Willens and Siemer conducted 136 separate interviews, over nearly ten years, with the various bureaucratic and political players. They also collected more than 70,000 pages of government documents under the Freedom of Information Act. The sheer mass of material does sometimes threaten to overwhelm the narrative, but on the whole the authors manage their material well. Unfortunately, the authors did not give more than passing mention to the difficulties that they encountered in doing their research. In order to gain access to the documents that they needed, Willens and Siemer had to bring numerous administrative and legal actions against various government agencies. The story of their struggle, which went on for several years and involved repeated trips to court, would make a fascinating appendix or article in its own right.

They are aided in their task, of course, by a lively cast of characters; in the first few pages, we meet a "strangely mercurial" Deputy High Commissioner who kicks a dilapidated schoolhouse on Yap Island and decries it as "not America", a High Commissioner who is "the ultimate slowed-down bureaucrat", and an economist who summarizes the Territory's problems as "beer, transistor radios, and motor scooters". The occasionally sur-

real nature of Micronesian-American politics also provides moments of rare diversion. The penultimate negotiation for the Marianas Islands, for instance, takes place in a graveyard in Kona, Hawaii, in 1971; the Micronesian delegation to the negotiations with the US includes an anthropologist who considers the tiny Micronesian middle class to be “parasitic” and suggests that the islands organize their societies “on the Chinese, Cuban, or Tanzanian models”.

If the book were simply the chronicle of a complex political process, it would still be well worth the attention of political scientists and diplomatic historians. There is another aspect worth mentioning, however. Willens and Siemer do have an axe to grind, although it’s one that will be obvious only to those few who take an intense interest in Micronesian affairs.

The conventional account of the decolonization of Micronesia –insofar as such a thing exists – holds that the United States deliberately violated the doctrine of *uti possidetis* for its own selfish reasons, forcing the breakup of the Trust Territory into separate political entities and aborting what might have been a United States of Micronesia. The former Trust Territory now consists of no less than three separate independent nations, plus a United States commonwealth. This is, according to some, a thoroughly unsatisfactory result, and one that was forced upon the Micronesians by the United States, with the connivance of a handful of local puppets in the Marianas Islands. The Americans desired this outcome so that they could continue to dominate the fragmented islands, and (particularly) so that they could acquire military bases in the Marianas and testing grounds in the Marshalls. This interpretation appeared complete for the first time in Donald McHenry’s 1975 work *Micronesia: Trust Betrayed*. Consistent if not compelling, it has been propagated by sympathizers both within the islands and beyond, and has held the field more or less unquestioned since then.

Until now. Willens and Siemer have quite thoroughly and convincingly demolished the idea of an American

“conspiracy” to break up the Trust Territory. The Americans, it turns out, were far too disorganized and competitive among themselves to be capable of any such Machiavellian plan. Furthermore, insofar as the Americans had a consistent position, they wanted the Trust Territory to remain intact; *uti possidetis* kept its grip on their imagination for more than a decade. The authors of the breakup of Micronesia, it is now clear, were the Micronesians. The Marianas Islanders were fiercely determined to have their own relationship with the United States, and were willing to break up the Trust Territory to do it. The other Micronesians, themselves divided, were unable to muster the political will to hold the Trust Territory together.

What is particularly interesting is how the Micronesians come out of it. Far from being passive victims or puppets, it’s now clear that they were determined, energetic, and surprisingly competent negotiators. If they were divided, so too were the Americans; and what they lacked in educational background and political experience, they more than made up for with motivation, energy, and persistence over time. The Americans, and the Micronesian opponents of partition, were finally, simply, argued around.

National Security and Self-Determination is not without its flaws. The narrative tends to center around the Marianas Islanders, the “squeaky wheels” of the Trust Territory. The cast of characters occasionally grows unwieldy; the reader may sometimes wish to be reminded just who is who. And national security, despite the title, plays only a minor role; the book is really the story of a complex, multiparty power struggle among bureaucrats, elected officials, and colonials. But these are quibbles. Willens and Siemer have written a work of which any professional historian would be proud; through intense and often difficult research, they have produced a meticulously detailed chronicle, and have quite definitively destroyed the previously dominant paradigm in the process. *National Security and Self-Determination* is both a fascinating case study in political science and a solid work of diplomatic history.

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