

Prelude to War? The United States, Japan, and the Yap Crisis, 1918–22

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For a brief time between the close of the First World War and the Washington Conference, the tiny island of Yap, in the Carolines of the western Pacific, became the focus of international concern. It seemed an unlikely place to bring two powerful nations like Japan and the United States to war, but that possibility lingered throughout much of the debate over the island's future. Yap also suggested to a number of Americans in the Navy and State departments that war with Japan must entail a bloody island-hopping campaign across the Pacific. Recently available and rarely consulted Department of State archives and navy records shed light on a small but significant component of American-Japanese relations before World War II, namely the Wilson and Harding administrations' attempts to keep Yap out of the hands of the Japanese empire. The Yap dispute illustrates the poor state of American relations with Japan at the time, indicating to both Woodrow Wilson and Warren G. Harding that problems related to the naval race and the Anglo-Japanese alliance could escalate into a Pacific war.¹

Possession of Yap was not a serious topic of discussion for the world's diplomats until the era of the Great War. Discovered in 1791, it became a trading center for the Godeffroy Company of Hamburg, Germany. The Spanish flag was raised in 1885, but, with the rest of the Carolines, Yap passed to Germany in 1899 following the collapse of Spain's Pacific empire. In 1914 Japan took over Yap during a series of Pacific island invasions at the beginning of the First World War. The indigenous Yapese, with one of the more primitive life-styles of the Pacific region, suffered greatly throughout this latter period. Although Yap's colonial rulers preferred loosely run administrations that had

¹The Yap issue has yet to be the focus of a specific study. Excellent background information can be culled from Earl S. Pomeroy, "American Policy Respecting the Marshalls, Carolines, and Marianas, 1898–1941," *Pacific Historical Review* 17 (1948): 45–53; Russell H. Fifield, "Disposal of the Carolines, Marshalls, and Marianas at the Paris Peace Conference," *American Historical Review* 51 (1946): 472–79; and William R. Braisted, *The United States Navy in the Pacific, 1909–1922* (Austin, TX, 1971), pp. 527–34.

a limited impact on native life, the introduction of new diseases and brief, halfhearted attempts to modernize selected coastal villages had a devastating effect. Of its 12,000 natives counted in 1896, less than 5,000 remained in 1918. This death of an island people received little notice from the various colonial masters of Yap, or from any other nation.² In 1918 many individuals, however, at least had heard of the island, although they probably could not pinpoint it on a map. Yap was famous for its currency of large calcite disks of stone formerly mined in the Palau Islands some two hundred miles to the southwest. The island seemed to stand as a symbol of a simpler era, a living example of man's Stone Age past. It was, perhaps, only a matter of time before the modern world collided with this struggling culture and destroyed it. The possibility that several nations might simultaneously clash over the island was an even sadder prospect for both the war weary combatants of 1918 and the Yapese who would be trapped at the center.

The Wilson administration's conflict with Japan on Pacific island issues stemmed from the early days of the First World War. Wilson had not objected to the efficient Japanese takeover of Germany's ill-manned and poorly administered Pacific island colonies and originally had welcomed this as a measure that perhaps could draw some pressure off the besieged Allies. But the Germans had only a minimal interest in the fate of the islands, and the scope and swiftness of the Japanese occupation soon disturbed him.³

President Wilson was especially worried about Japan's intentions in the northern Marianas, the Carolines, and the Marshalls. Did it intend to surround America's military establishment in the southern Marianas and Guam and to turn at least the western Pacific into a Japanese lake? Did it have even greater ambitions to use the island chains as stepping-stones to challenge America's presence in Hawaii? Did Japan hope to establish its own versions of Guam's naval station or Hawaii's Pearl Harbor in its new possessions and to isolate the United States from the Philippines? Should the Wilson administration consider Japan's occupations a hostile act? These were questions put to Baron Tomosaburo Kato, the Japanese foreign minister, by Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan in a series of letters during December 1914.⁴

Kato attempted to assure the Wilson administration that the Japanese government had undertaken these occupations to assist the Allied war effort. The Japanese presence there was to be "a temporary occupation." Once the Allies had achieved victory, Japan would withdraw. Kato promised that his government would only consider the islands as important to Japanese "commerce and navigation." Furthermore, since Germany indicated no desire to

²Report on Yap, Marshall Dill, chairman, Foreign Trade Committee, San Francisco Chamber of Commerce, to Senator James Phelan, 27 April 1920, National Archives, Record Group 59, Central Files of the Department of State, M336, 862h.01/11 (hereafter cited as NA, RG59, M336).

³Wilson to Captain William J. Maxwell, governor of Guam, 12 December 1914; Secretary of State Robert Lansing to Cyrus Northrup, University of Minnesota, 13 August 1915, *ibid.*, F.W.862C.01/1.

⁴Bryan to Kato, 12-18 December 1914, *ibid.*, 763.72/1391.

regain the colonies, he announced that there was no need for a Japanese military presence on the islands.

Bryan accepted the foreign minister's answers as a special "guarantee," noting to Wilson that Japan had nothing to gain by challenging the United States in the Pacific at that time.⁵ Wilson interpreted events differently. George Guthrie, U.S. ambassador to Japan, had reported to the president that Kato's comments were meaningless; indeed, they were only worthy of further suspicions. Guthrie's reasoning reflected more than his own well-known distrust of Japanese policy. He found it significant that Genji Matsuda, considered by many Japanese as the Diet's most distinguished member, had publicly attacked Kato's promises as "most humiliating, impairing the independence and sovereignty of Japan." Tokyo, Matsuda concluded, must not be concerned about what America thinks. Given the popularity of Matsuda's position in the press, and apparently with the electorate, Guthrie predicted that Kato quickly would back away from the guarantee.⁶ He was correct. By January 1915, Kato already was beginning to ignore his previous promises to Bryan. He now believed that Japan should maintain a permanent presence on the islands.

Wilson warmly received Guthrie's reports and assessments, but Japan's intentions continued to confuse him. Messages from American and foreign merchant vessels that had sailed in the vicinity of the Marshalls indicated that Jaluit, a large coral atoll less than two thousand miles southwest of Hawaii and a similar distance east of Guam, was being transformed into a Japanese military base. Such a base would definitely threaten American naval superiority in the area as well as the status quo in trade and communications.⁷

The Wilson administration was immediately concerned about Guam, which indeed quickly had become surrounded by the Japanese. To learn more about Japan's plans for Guam and elsewhere, Franklin D. Roosevelt, the acting secretary of the navy, ordered Captain William J. Maxwell, the navy's governor of Guam, to tap Japanese communications, which relied on that island's sophisticated cable network to maintain contact with the western Pacific. Maxwell welcomed the mission despite several major problems. At first he had no Japanese translators, and then when they arrived the translators discovered that the Japanese government maintained a complicated code. Roosevelt promised the administration that the navy would break the code

⁵George Guthrie, ambassador to Japan, to Bryan, plus extract from the Parliamentary Supplement to the "Official Gazette"—speech of the minister for Foreign Affairs, 12 December 1914; Bryan to Kato, 18 December 1914, *ibid.*, 763.72/1391-92.

⁶Guthrie to Bryan, 18 December 1914, *ibid.*

⁷Japan's conflicting positions during the early days of its administration of Germany's former Pacific colonies are still not completely understood. The basic approach is noted in Tadao Yanaihara, *Pacific Islands Under Japanese Mandate: A Report in the International Research Series of the Institute of Pacific Relations, Oxford University* (London, 1940), pp. 23-25. For Wilson's fears, the best source remains "The Wilson Era Before 1917," in Braisted, *United States Navy in the Pacific*, pp. 253-55.

quickly, but it remained a complicated task.⁸ At the same time, the Japanese, who suspected this operation, switched most of their cable traffic to a less sophisticated system on Yap. An old German cable ran from Yap directly to Shanghai and the Dutch East Indies where it connected with one owned by the Dutch government which, in turn, connected to another running westward to India and Europe and southward to Australia. Yap also maintained a cable connection to Guam and a low-powered radio station to contact other neighboring islands.⁹

After failing to break the Japanese code and losing its main source of information to Yap, the U.S. Navy on Guam turned to intelligence gathering and analytical reports to help Wilson analyze Tokyo's intentions. Commander E. S. Kellogg, Office of Naval Intelligence, was officially in charge, although Major Earl "Pete" Ellis (USMC), his closest associate on the island, gradually took over the entire operation with Washington's approval. Soon to become a Marine Corps legend, Ellis arrived at the naval station fresh from a two-year tour as an instructor of intelligence at the Navy War College. While there he had helped train many of the admirals and generals who would lead America to victory in the Second World War. John A. Lejeune, the future major general commandant of the Marine Corps, had recommended Ellis for the Guam assignment, and Ellis himself had asked for the post.¹⁰

Well known for his drinking, brawling, and general mischief-making, Ellis was detested by Kellogg and most of the naval officers on Guam who were attempting to copy the British imperial approach to the gentleman's life of leisure and fine manners. Governor Maxwell consistently complained to his superiors about Ellis's apparent "loss of self-control and tending to hysteria." Ellis, on the other hand, offered similar accounts to the Marine Corps concerning the navy's "incompetence and foolishness."¹¹ Despite these difficulties, a comprehensive intelligence analysis was written, and President Wilson was to echo several of its conclusions over two years later in Paris.

Ellis's approach was twofold. First, as a linguist fluent in Japanese, he had much to offer when it came to interpreting Japanese events, and he believed in personal involvement in all facets of his mission. Masquerading

⁸Maxwell to secretary of navy [Daniels], 8, 10, 26 August 1915; acting secretary of navy [Burson] to secretary of state, 10 August 1915; Roosevelt to Maxwell and secretary of state, 25, 27, 30 August 1915, U.S., Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1915: Supplement: The World War* (Washington, DC, 1928), pp. 888–89 (hereafter cited as *FRUS*, followed by the appropriate volume and year); E. S. Kellogg and Earl Ellis, "Guam as a Navy Base," and "Guam and Military Reconnaissance, 1914–1915," reports by the Office of Naval Intelligence for the secretary of navy and Department of State, 1915–16, NA, RG45, Navy Records, Box 457/Guam.

⁹During the later Yap crisis, a popular myth was fostered by the press and others that the Yap cable included a direct connection to the Philippines. Consequently, Japanese control of such a cable would jeopardize American security vis-à-vis Philippine affairs. In reality, there was no such cable connection, and Washington was aware of this.

¹⁰For background on Ellis's controversial career, see Ronn Ronck, "Pete Ellis: A Spy in the Rock Islands," *Glimpses of Micronesia* 23 (1983): 22–27.

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 22–24.

as a representative of the New York-based Hughes Trading Company, he sailed to Kobe, Japan, and received the proper papers from the Japanese government to visit Jaluit and Yap. Second, he integrated the information that he learned there into a detailed assessment of America's chances to hold Guam, the Philippines, and Hawaii in the face of a dramatic Japanese assault. His conclusions were grim.

Ellis discovered that Jaluit was not the huge enemy base that the Wilson administration feared, but it was equally obvious that it was being prepared for such a role, probably within ten years. He also stressed that Yap was fast becoming Japan's communications lifeline to the Pacific, and the Japanese authorities seemed to have little toleration for the primitive native culture there. Noting an attitude of messianism on the part of the new Japanese colonials, Ellis predicted that the desire to liberate Pacific people from Western rule and influences could decimate island populations, including Yap. Time and another visit would tell. Meanwhile, this messianic spirit also appeared to be leading Japan to war with the United States. Immediate countermeasures were necessary, especially in relation to Guam and Yap.

Ellis agreed with the Wilson administration's decision that Guam was in the most danger. He considered the likelihood of diplomatic pressure to force the withdrawal of the two thousand navy, marine, and insular forces, the ease of armed encirclement, and the possibility of attack. He called for a "ring of fire," a main line of fixed gun positions backed by land and sea forces established at Apra Harbor near Guam's capital city of Agana. If the Japanese broke through this ring, another line of defense should be constructed in the palm-lined hills surrounding the harbor. Finally, he argued that Orote Peninsula, the only other possible amphibious landing point on the reef-ringed island, also must be defended to deny the enemy a safe anchorage and the opportunity to organize a counterattack. According to Ellis, Guam's few fortifications and capabilities for defense were laughable and might actually invite Japanese aggression in the Pacific. Consequently, an unassailable Guam, plus a diplomatic challenge to Japan's imminent monopoly over communications in the western Pacific at Yap, might convince the Japanese to halt all plans for Jaluit and to contemplate a peaceful future for the whole Pacific.¹²

Interservice rivalries and personality clashes clouded the significance of Ellis's report. Speaking for the navy at Guam, Governor Maxwell considered the major's conclusions exaggerated. He saw no need to transform the comfortable island paradise into a Marianas version of Corregidor.¹³ Contending that Ellis's drinking problem might have affected his judgment, Maxwell had him removed from his intelligence position and named him secretary and aide to the governor, a new job without influence. Coming to the rescue of his old friend, General Lejeune quickly had Ellis transferred to his mainland command one year before America's entry into World War I. An enthusiastic

¹²Ellis, "Guam and Military Reconnaissance," NA, RG45, Navy Records, Box 457/Guam.

¹³Maxwell to secretary of navy, 28 April 1916, *ibid.* Maxwell left office the following day, and Lieutenant Commander W. P. Cronan became the acting governor of Guam.

supporter of Ellis's conclusions, Lejeune attempted to assure President Wilson that stories about the major's drinking must not detract from the importance of his well-researched report, for "Ellis drunk is worth ten men sober."¹⁴

From the submission of Ellis's report until late 1917, the Wilson administration considered the issue of the new Japanese islands as a future problem for the military. Despite the rhetoric of urgency typical of military reports of the era, even Ellis had predicted dramatic events to occur within years and not months; hence, there was plenty of time to formulate a proper response. The president came to regard Japan's control of the Yap cable as wedded to Guam's precarious security. For a time he even treated it as a local issue, something for the governor of Guam to worry about in relation to his own island's now underused international communications system. Wilson's attentions were naturally turned toward events in Europe and the larger issue of Tokyo's ambitions in China. The Pacific would have to wait for the Allied victory.

This attitude began to change in January 1918 when Tokyo announced that the administration of the Pacific islands might be placed solely in the hands of the Japanese military. Secretary of State Robert Lansing, certainly more sympathetic to Wilson's view than Bryan had been, believed that America's recent neglect of Pacific issues had permitted the Japanese to make their move. Since Allied success in Europe still remained uncertain, Lansing ruled out any unilateral military response. At the same time, however, he was not sure what type of response was necessary. He saw little immediate use for Ellis's idea of a Fortress Guam. Instead, he eventually decided that a show of Allied diplomatic solidarity against Japan, as well as a firm defense of the democratic principle of self-determination, was the proper approach.¹⁵

There was reason to hope that international protests against Japan's proposed militarization of the Pacific might work where a lonely American protest might fail. For instance, U.S. protest against Japan's Twenty-One Demands on China had prevented Tokyo from reducing China to a protectorate; nevertheless, the Japanese still won a commanding position in China. According to the Wilson administration, Allied protests against Japan's latest plans might influence the Japanese to think twice about the future. Ironically, Washington believed this despite the fact that the United States maintained a military administration on Guam similar to Tokyo's plans for the nearby islands. In short, if Japan desired a harmonious relationship with the Western allies, it would indeed back down. Such was Washington's reasoning in January 1918.

As the months went by it became apparent that the U.S. government had overreacted to exaggerated and poorly translated newspaper reports of Japanese intentions sent to the State Department by the American embassy

¹⁴Lejeune to Wilson, 28 April 1916, *ibid.*

¹⁵Lansing to ambassador in Japan, 18 January 1918, NA, RG59, 763.72/85 82a.

in Tokyo. In reality, Japan hoped to experiment with a coalition-style government of Japanese military and civilian officials and native business collaborators. Once acquainted with this reality, the Wilson administration wondered if the principle of self-determination should be applied to the Pacific islands.¹⁶ Evidence of Japanese brutality would make the decision easier. Ellis's report remained the only detailed confirmation of the destructive impact of Japan's rule on native life. It was also known, however, that Yap's Stone Age culture and inability to coexist with a foreign presence were unique among the island peoples and, to make matters worse, the Japanese had tripled the number of foreign residents on that island.

Later studies by Oxford University's Institute of Pacific Relations indicated that Yap's depopulation problem would have continued regardless of whether a Japanese or American culture had been introduced in 1914. Furthermore, as early as 1906, Japanese firms, such as Kioki Shokai and Murayama Shokai, had invaded and captured over 90 percent of the copra trade, the economic staple of most of the Carolines, Marianas, and Marshalls. Japan left Germany in political control only. Shortly before World War I the German authorities finally began to clamp down on the economic rape of their possessions by a foreign power. When the war began, demands on the Diet from Japanese merchants to reestablish the old economic status quo and take advantage of Germany's vulnerability were well put and answered. Without question, economic goals were important considerations alongside the strategic-political aims of the Tokyo government. The new overlords of the Pacific islands found a populace that was used to dealing with the Japanese, and, in some cases, such as in Palau, the natives hoped that the previously profitable relationship would continue.¹⁷

Japan's coalition approach to Pacific government temporarily relieved some of Wilson's previous fears over U.S. security in the Pacific. With the exception of Yap, he supported the Tokyo delegation's request at the Paris Peace Conference to maintain Japanese control, as a League of Nations mandate, over Germany's former Pacific colonies. Wilson's exception to Yap was based on two points. First, no single nation should be allowed to run the Pacific's most important communication center. He called for international control of Yap and for a special Allied conference to arrange its administration. Second, he believed that self-determination must be granted to the Yapese. According to Wilson, Japan's demand for Yap was similar to Italy's demand for Fiume. Croatia had been promised Fiume, and Italy's delegation walked out of the Paris Peace Conference when Wilson objected to its claims. Quickly taking advantage of this crisis, Japan submitted its Yap demand, a tactic that annoyed Wilson. He stated his belief that an international administration pursuing a policy of "non-interference" in Yapese culture would assure the

¹⁶See Wilson and Lansing's review of the administration's early approach to Yap in their comments to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 30 April, 1 May, and 19 August 1919, *ibid.*, 862i.01/3.

¹⁷Yanaihara, *Pacific Islands Under Japanese Mandate*, pp. 25–28.

survival of that culture. He did not elaborate, confusing both the American and Japanese delegations as to what he meant by self-determination for Yap.¹⁸

Wilson expected protests from the Japanese and received them; however, he also assumed that the British and the French, the other major colonial powers in the Pacific islands, would eventually support him on what he considered a minor issue. In fact, he only presented his Yap exception to the conference, not as a written policy but as an oral statement, followed by an immediate change of subject.

Remarkably, Wilson left Paris without asking the Western allies their exact position on Yap. He hoped that the matter would be solved quickly when the conference was convened, but no precise date had been set. His primary concern now was the Senate's reaction to the Versailles Treaty in general. He was taken aback, therefore, when the Senate turned much of its attention toward his Yap exception. Henry Cabot Lodge (R-MA), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the president's chief Republican rival, called a special public hearing on what he considered Wilson's "unusual" approach to policy regarding Yap.

On 30 April and 1 May 1919, Secretary of State Lansing tried his best to inform the committee how the Wilson administration viewed the issues of the Japanese islands, the Yap cable, and Yapese self-determination. Lansing insisted that the Yap issue would be solved at the international conference and that there was nothing unusual about an oral exception. He could not say, however, what the British and the French positions might be at the conference. The secretary pointed out that the committee was exaggerating the importance of the Yap issue and that Wilson, who was ailing at the time, had other matters to consider. Lodge disagreed and formally requested the president to appear before the Foreign Relations Committee.¹⁹

Wilson did not go before the committee until August 1919, arousing some suspicion among its members that he was hiding something. The committee members' early questions reflected this concern when they asked the president if the United States planned to abuse the proposed international control of the island, take it over eventually, or establish a military presence. Not in the best of health, and apparently annoyed with the proceedings from the beginning, Wilson confined his responses mostly to yes and no. He answered with a loud "No" to the question of an American plot. His most significant reply concerned the oral exception. "I only partially remember it," he said. "The necessity of having some base for communications upon the island was mentioned [by the Japanese], just in what form I do not remember. But let me say this, there is a little island which I must admit I had not heard of before."²⁰

¹⁸Minutes of the Paris Peace Conference (Yap discussion) presented to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 30 April 1919, NA, RG59, M336, 862i.01/3.

¹⁹Committee hearing, 30 April and 1 May 1919, *ibid.*

²⁰Committee hearing, 19 August 1919, *ibid.*

By the end of the hearing, Lodge's committee realized that, because of the nature of the oral exception, the Yap issue depended upon the president's memory, which seemed to be failing. Committing the United States to a policy that Wilson had set but no longer remembered was unacceptable to the committee. Senator James Phelan (D-CA) charged that Wilson was deceiving the Senate and that some secret arrangement must already have been made over Yap. Lodge doubted it, as did most of his colleagues.²¹ The accuracy of the president's memory was now part of the Yap issue, and further investigations seemed necessary.

The precise role of the proposed international conference on Yap never seemed clear to Lodge, and his requests for information from the British and the French were not answered to his satisfaction. The Wilson administration found reasons for concern too when both London and Paris indicated support for the Japanese position, especially in the council of the fledgling League of Nations organization. At this point, Undersecretary of State Norman Davis took the initiative and, with Wilson's approval and Lodge's support, sent a harshly worded message to the British and French governments. He suggested that their previous silence on, and now open support for, Japan's claim to Yap was wrong, and if it continued the United States would consider this as an "absolute disregard for American rights." The two governments responded in separate, similarly worded messages that they had no real objection to Japan's desire for a league mandate. America's denial of a mandate, they argued, could lead to unnecessary tensions in the Pacific which, in turn, might adversely affect British and French Pacific island possessions. Moreover, they had little interest in participating in an internationalized administration of Yap, or even in a conference to discuss the matter. They also hinted that the issue was too minor for further consideration, suggesting, at least to Davis, that the contrary was true. The two governments, he believed, really saw Yap as a thorny problem worth avoiding, a view he had held since Paris.²²

Washington was faced with the alternatives of pressuring the British and French to choose between the United States and Japan or simply letting the issue slide during the domestic debate over the ratification of the Versailles Treaty. In March 1920, Wilson chose the latter course, losing the debate and leaving the Yap issue and other foreign policy matters to be resolved by his successors. One of those other issues involved the American expedition to Siberia and North Russia. Sent to assist the British and the French in an attempt to keep Russian supplies from falling into the hands of the Germans

²¹Phelan made his first charge at the end of the hearing, but he continued to raise the same objection for nearly one year, eventually prompting Lodge to divorce his committee from any comments on Yap made by the California senator. Phelan to Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby, 8 May 1920, and Colby memorandum on Lodge and Yap, 10 July 1920, *ibid.*, 862i.01/11, /17.

²²Colby to Wilson, 8 May 1920; Lodge to Davis, 10 December 1920; Davis to Wilson, 12 January 1921; memorandums for ambassadors to France and Great Britain, 17 January 1921; Wilson to Davis, 13 January 1921; Wallace to Colby, 1 March 1921; all in *ibid.*, 862.01/3, /25, /25A, /47, /82.

near the end of World War I, as well as to aid a general anti-Soviet policy, Wilson's expedition also was dispatched to keep a close eye on Japanese forces there, even after the Great War ended. He pulled out American troops in April 1920, due mostly to public pressure following the defeat of the Versailles Treaty. At the same time, the Japanese expanded their military presence, winning control of eastern Siberia.²³

As the Siberian intervention suggested, suspicions of Japanese intentions in the Far East were at an all-time high in the American government when Wilson left office, and this had a notable impact on the Yap issue.²⁴ Shortly after he assumed his duties as secretary of state in the new Republican administration of President Harding, Charles Evans Hughes announced that Yap would be handled differently. It was not a minor issue, he said. Promising to modify Wilson's stark alternatives approach to the British and the French, Hughes asked the two allies to explain their legal justification for agreeing with Japan and their failure to consult with American officials. He charged that the Japanese position would not have any validity in international law unless the United States, as a recent wartime ally, approved the settlement.²⁵

As a former Supreme Court justice, Hughes's legalism was not surprising; his action reflected a variety of legal concerns. On the one hand, he firmly believed that, since the United States had not ratified the Versailles Treaty, it could not be bound to the Yap mandate decision. Because America had played a primary role in the defeat of Germany, or a larger part than Japan had, the U.S. government had certain rights, recognized by international law, even to claim Yap for itself. Nevertheless, Hughes advocated no plan to dispatch a military force to capture the island, nor, like Wilson and Governor Maxwell, did he see any need for a Fortress Guam. He expected the Europeans to back away from their support for Japan, and for Japan to compromise its claim.²⁶

If the secretary of state's expectations did not materialize, America would be the nation forced either to compromise its stand or to seize Yap. Given the Harding administration's goals of disarmament and economy as a better approach to peace than the League of Nations, it remained unlikely that the president would overrule Hughes's optimistic tactics to favor a more militant challenge to Tokyo. In any event, American-Japanese relations remained on a collision course. In May 1921, Congress passed the Emergency

²³ Among the several accounts of this expedition, the Japanese element is still best stressed in Betty M. Unterberger, "President Wilson and the Decision To Send American Troops to Siberia," *Pacific Historical Review* 24 (1955): 63–74.

²⁴ Both the American and Japanese governments expressed their formal sympathies that the Yap issue could not have been solved before the Wilson administration folded. See Colby to Count Uchida, Japanese minister for Foreign Affairs, 6 December 1920; and Uchida to Colby, 27 February 1921; NA, RG59, M336, 862i.01/46.

²⁵ Hughes even transmitted copies of his correspondence to Britain and France to the Japanese government, along with a lengthy explanation of the Harding administration's approach to Yap. Hughes to Uchida, 2, 5 April 1921, *ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.* See also Hughes's comments to French government officials René Viviani and Jules Jusserand during a discussion on Yap, 30 March 1921, *FRUS*, 1921, 1:996–97.

Quota Act, an anti-immigration measure that deliberately excluded the Japanese from a quota number. The Pacific coast states resumed the passage of racist ordinances such as forbidding Japanese-Americans and immigrants to rent land. Both Democratic and Republican party politicians continued to condemn Japanese "aggression" in Shantung and eastern Siberia. Tokyo's protests were ignored.

For many Americans, including those in the military, the Yap mandate crisis seemed to be the last issue pushing the country to war. The U.S. Navy tried to convince Hughes that his legal complaints might fail and that he must work harder to find a solution. In April 1921 the navy noted that, while it was ready to accept the challenge of defending the Pacific from Japanese aggression, substantial difficulties remained. For instance, the navy's defense of Guam could not be assured since Ellis's recommendations had been only partially fulfilled. Navy officials also voiced concern that France, and especially Britain, might offer some support to Japan if naval fighting broke out. The navy did not know whether victory was possible under such circumstances.²⁷

Clever military schemes were not much more attractive to the navy, which rejected a plan from the American ambassador in Paris which would require the United States to obtain the French-held territories in the joint British-French controlled New Hebrides. According to the arrangement, the U.S. Navy would then establish a base in the heart of Europe's Pacific island colonies, keeping the old Western allies away from a potential U.S.-Japanese naval engagement near Yap. The French were supposed to give up the islands in exchange for lower war debt payments to the United States. The navy considered the argument to be a diplomatic surrender that would create a warlike atmosphere.²⁸ In general, the navy's support for a 1921 campaign in the Pacific was weak, and its report to Hughes admitted only that it would gladly accept its patriotic duty.

Part of the U.S. Navy's attitude was due to another report by Ellis, now a household name to many veterans due to the multitude of decorations he had won in France during the war. Under cover again he sailed to Yap and nearby Palau, discovering to his surprise that the natives appeared content with the Japanese. There was no clue whether or not this satisfaction would result in resistance to an American liberation, but the U.S. military in the Pacific had been sensitive to the issue of local resistance since their controversial pacification campaign in the Philippines two decades earlier.²⁹

²⁷The navy originally had prepared and submitted its position in February 1921, but it was returned by Undersecretary of State Davis so that the navy could present it, with possible modifications, to the incoming administration. Daniels to Colby, 28 February 1921; and Davis to Daniels, 29 February 1921; Hughes to the Navy Department, 26 April 1921; NA, RG59, M336, 862i.01/29, 851P.52/1.

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹Ellis to Lejeune, and "Advanced Base Operations in Micronesia," 23 June 1921, *ibid.* Ellis died in Palau during a third undercover mission in 1923. The exact cause of death remains a mystery, although locals believe that his real identity was somehow exposed to the Japanese authorities and he was murdered. Ronck, "Ellis," p. 25.

The navy's opinion significantly influenced Hughes's follow-up communications to the Western allies. He now attempted to familiarize the British and French with the military realities of defending Japan's claim in Yap. The prospect of a naval rivalry concerned Hughes, especially after Britain announced in March 1921 its resumption of ship construction in order to maintain the largest fleet in the world. Britain's move seemed to be pointed against America's recent status as a leading naval power. Complicating the matter further was a nineteen-year-old alliance with Japan which technically could bind Britain to go to war against the United States over Yap. At Paris, Wilson had assumed that the alliance was insignificant after tsarist Russia and imperial Germany had collapsed. The Harding administration found it more difficult to dismiss such assumptions.

Since the Open Door in Asia, and American security in general, might require a fleet equal to the combined British and Japanese navies, Hughes hoped to rescue the world, particularly the American taxpayer, from a costly and potentially deadly shipbuilding program. Resolving the Yap issue would be the first step toward peace, and he made this clear in what he proposed as his "final word" on Yap to the Allies.³⁰

Tokyo reacted negatively to Hughes's final word diplomacy. Reminiscent of President Wilson's argument, the Japanese government complained that Yap was a minor issue. The real problem, contended Prime Minister Takashi Hara, was naval rivalry in the Pacific. Japan's shipbuilding program had accelerated during the First World War, and many Japanese politicians believed that their country's new standing as a naval power deserved international recognition. That recognition would be the first step to assuring peace in the Pacific, Hara once explained to the Diet.

Concern over the naval race was expressed by a number of Japanese with different political affiliations. Even before the question of naval talks was raised by the American and British governments in 1921, Baron Tadasu Hayashi, the conservative Japanese ambassador to Britain, privately suggested a conference to his English hosts. On 22 January 1921, Osachi Hamaguchi, a leader of the opposition Kenseikai party and a future prime minister, asked Hara to lobby for an Allied naval limitation conference. Shipbuilding costs were too high, he noted, and domestic priorities were being ignored. Yukio Ozaki, a highly respected pacifist and Diet member, introduced a resolution calling for naval disarmament in conjunction with the United States and Britain. The resolution was defeated, but it received significant attention. Hara admitted that public opinion had been aroused by the peaceful good

³⁰Hughes's last appeal, and the British and French points of view between March and September 1921, are well stated and reviewed in a Department of State memorandum of 13 September 1921. For background see also Lord Curzon to Hughes, 21 March and 21 April 1921; "Correspondence Between His Majesty's Government and the United States Ambassador," "Rights of the Pacific" (London, 1921); and interviews with the French and British ambassadors, 12 April 1921, NA, RG59, M336, 862i.01/84, /117, /175; chargé in Great Britain (Wheeler) to secretary of state, plus enclosure on Japanese position on Yap and the Pacific, 6, 7 August 1921, *FRUS*, 1921, 1:52-53.

intentions of Ozaki and Hamaguchi. He promised to work for a "new international system," one that recognized Japanese power but reduced the possibility of war in the Pacific.³¹

Hara eventually changed his position on the island's importance, explaining that Japan's "thirst for happiness and security" might never be quenched if the "harsh reality of Yap" disrupted the peace. For the moment, however, he offered no solutions to the crisis beyond that of a simple renewal of the Anglo-Japanese alliance. To the Japanese government, the alliance always had offered security against a third power such as the United States. Should it expire without renewal, Hara feared that Britain would transfer most of its fleet to the Pacific colonies. Japan then would be isolated from a balance of power in the Far East defended by Western colonials. In the interest of maintaining the status quo in Far Eastern policy, the British government had no objections to a renewal. Following a visit to London by Crown Prince Hirohito, Britain decided that the new alliance would be shorter in duration, consistent with the covenant of the League of Nations, and written in a way that would not disturb the Americans.³²

A number of Allied governments also prepared their answers to Hughes's final word. Premier Aristide Briand of France had been the first to respond, indicating that his country welcomed a solution that was "satisfying" to the United States. Recommending a quick compromise with the Japanese to ease tensions, Briand offered his government's "good offices" to mediate the dispute if Washington saw a need for such assistance. Nevertheless, it was apparent by the careful wording and tone of the communiqué that Briand actually hoped to keep France out of the dispute, that the argument had gone far enough, and that Britain must realize the seriousness of the American-Japanese row before it was too late. Faced with the tasks of postwar reconstruction, arranging a new European security scheme to benefit France, and propping up what he considered the weak French colonial structure in the Far East, Briand feared for the future of his country in yet another war. Solidarity among the Western allies would certainly make the Japanese think twice about

³¹Ibid. Richard Storry, *Japan and the Decline of the West in Asia, 1894–1943* (Hong Kong, 1979), pp. 120–21; Mark R. Peattie, *Ishihara Kanji and Japan's Confrontation with the West* (Princeton, NJ, 1975), p. 17; Asahi Shimbrum-sha, *The Pacific Rivals: A Japanese View of Japanese-American Relations* (Tokyo, 1972), pp. 74–75; Masamichi Royama, *Foreign Policy of Japan: 1914–1939* (Westport, CT, 1941), pp. 29–31; Morinosuke Kajima, *A Brief Diplomatic History of Modern Japan* (Tokyo, 1965), pp. 71–72.

³²The Japanese decision to renew the alliance met with opposition from the army and some businessmen. Based on nationalist sentiment and distrust of Britain, this opposition was ignored by Tokyo. Britain's decision to renew faced opposition from significant policymakers within the government who favored a tripartite entente between Japan, Britain, and the United States. This opposition added fuel to later Australian and Canadian complaints at an imperial conference during the summer of 1921. Memorandum by Wellesley on Anglo-American cooperation in the Far East, 1 June 1920; memorandum by Wellesley respecting the Anglo-Japanese alliance, 1 September 1920; Lord Curzon to Sir C. Eliot (Tokyo), 21 October 1920; report of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance Committee, 21 January 1921; *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919–1939*, vol. 14, 1st ser. (London, 1966), pp. 32–36, 106–13, 158–59, 221–27.

Yap, as the Wilson administration once implied. It also might make the Americans more generous to France on the problem of war debts to Washington.³³

Lord Curzon of the British Foreign Office did his best to explain to Hughes Britain's dilemma over the Japanese alliance. He hoped that the American people would understand that London could not easily abandon its long-standing status quo agreement with Japan. Curzon promised, however, to try to persuade Tokyo to accept a compromise over Yap. In the meantime, he found a scapegoat for the current tension that the Yap issue was creating between the United States and Britain. Sir Maurice Hankey, who had represented Britain during the opening sessions of the League Council, had acted on his own, Curzon stressed, when he offered British support to Japan over Yap. If Hankey had consulted with him on the issue, he noted, the result might have been a British-inspired American-Japanese mandate. The Yap crisis was far more important than the English had realized, Curzon admitted. For this, he apologized and concluded that Hankey was not "guilty of a trick" or of being a "perpetrator of secret deals with the Japanese behind the back of the American Government." He could be shamed only for what Curzon politely termed "his subtlety."³⁴

As the French and British replies suggest, Hughes's approach, although not so very different from that of his predecessor, had influenced Allied opinion more successfully than Wilson's. Even the Japanese, who had held to their position to maintain their presence in Yap without foreign interference, began to bend during the summer of 1921. Their changing attitude resulted chiefly from Britain's new nervousness and the sudden realization that the sword-rattling rhetoric coming from both Washington and Tokyo might truly mean war. Baron Kijuro Shidehara, the Japanese ambassador to the United States, indicated to Hughes that the diplomatic correspondence concerning the Yap issue should be made public to inform everyone fully of the seriousness of the affair. More important, for the first time, the ambassador suggested that his government desired a settlement and would be content if Tokyo was left in "symbolic control" of Yap.³⁵ The nature of the argument had changed again; it was now up to Washington and Tokyo to agree on what symbolic control entailed.

Hughes refused to release secret documents to the press, but he admitted privately that Shidehara's comments were a positive sign. In fact, he now believed that the matter could be ended quickly.³⁶ In July 1921, at an imperial

³³Department of State memorandum, 13 September 1921; and interview with French ambassador, 12 April 1921, NA, RG59, M336, 862i.01/84, /175.

³⁴Curzon to Hughes, 21 March and 21 April 1921; "Correspondence Between His Majesty's Government and the United States Ambassador," "Rights of the Pacific," *ibid.*

³⁵Some correspondence between Hughes and Shidehara (18 June 1921–19 August 1921) mentions the Yap issue and can be found in *FRUS*, 1921, vol. 1. For the "symbolic control" matter, see Department of State memorandum, 13 September 1921, NA, RG59, M336, 862i.01/175.

³⁶*Ibid.*

conference in London, the Canadian and Australian delegations gave Hughes further reason for hope. The Canadians argued with particular effectiveness that the Anglo-Japanese alliance might eventually force them to fight their American neighbor in a war over Yap or some other unforeseen crisis. Despite the logic of the argument, the British government refused to abandon the alliance, as it did not want to appear to be joining the United States against Japan.³⁷ Consequently, the imperial conference recommended a special meeting of Pacific powers to resolve the issue, stressing American-British-Japanese friendship. London accepted the recommendation, but Hughes considered a Pacific conference too limited in scope, for the appropriate general topic, he believed, was naval disarmament. A Pacific accord could result, he stressed, following the adjournment of his version of the Allied conference.

It took several months for the British and the Americans to agree on a conference that included both naval limitation and Pacific-Far Eastern problems as official topics of discussion. Since Britain's finances, drained by the First World War, could no longer support an unrestrained naval race, Prime Minister David Lloyd George reversed a naval rearmament decision of March 1921, renounced the primacy of the Royal Navy on the high seas, and decided to seek naval parity with the United States. After selecting Washington as the conference site, Hughes concluded that solving the Yap issue would provide excellent groundwork for the talks. It also might keep the discussions focused on the naval disarmament issue.

Between 20 July and 14 September 1921, Washington and Tokyo resolved most of their differences over Yap. The settlement occurred with amazing ease. America recognized a Japanese-run League of Nations mandate over the island, with four major provisos: American nationals who visited or resided in Yap were to have the same rights and privileges as in all other league mandates; Japan would be prohibited from maintaining "monopolistic concessions"—the cable, for instance—granting free access to "other nations," such as the United States, to assure the existence of free enterprise and competition; freedom of worship and respect for the rights of the Yapese, a gesture toward self-determination; and most favored nation status, a formal recognition of American interests on the island.³⁸

The Japanese agreed to all four points before the Washington Conference, but they added a reservation to the first proviso which delayed the signing of the Yap treaty until February 1922. This reservation, which Japan failed to receive, was more symbolic than anything else, and stemmed from both the Paris Peace Conference and the long-standing difficulty between the two countries. Tokyo wanted a statement from the American government that denounced racism and welcomed the rights of Japanese to live freely and

³⁷John C. Vinson, "The Imperial Conference of 1921 and the Anglo-Japanese Alliance," *Pacific Historical Review* 31 (1962): 257–66.

³⁸Hughes to the Japanese government, 4 August 1921; interview with Shidehara, 8 September 1921; and "American Rights Desired in Japanese Mandate," 13 September 1921, NA, RG59, M336, 862i.01/175.

happily outside of Japan, be it in league-mandated territories or in the United States. Hughes believed that this request was misplaced and involved too many connotations beyond the Yap issue. He agreed, however, that it was worthy of future discussion.³⁹ Realizing that this was as far as Hughes was willing to go, the Japanese government accepted the secretary of state's good intentions and signed the treaty.

The abrogation of the Anglo-Japanese alliance during the Washington Conference had helped to bring about the final agreement over Yap. As chairman of the nine-power conference, Hughes concentrated on naval disarmament, but quietly and secretly the British and Japanese delegations also worked on a new approach to the alliance. Since the United States favored its end, Britain and Japan reasoned that a naval agreement would never be reached unless the alliance was nullified. Concluding that a three-power substitute was in order, London and Tokyo learned that Hughes favored the addition of a fourth power, France, since the French had protested their secondary role to the Big Three. Moreover, Hughes believed that the inclusion of France added a certain balance in Pacific affairs.

Agreeing to respect each other's rights in their island possessions in the Pacific, the four powers signed a treaty in December 1921. All Pacific disputes were to be referred to specially arranged four-power conferences, and no pledges of military assistance were made. The British were permitted to back out of the Anglo-Japanese alliance without offending Tokyo, and the Japanese were spared the isolation that they feared would result by scrapping it. Meanwhile, the United States had had little to do with the final arrangement but was assured a rapid conclusion to the Yap crisis because of it. Indeed, Sir Robert Vansittart, British foreign policy specialist and permanent undersecretary of state for Foreign Affairs during the 1930s, once commented that he and his colleagues had ended the Anglo-Japanese alliance "to please America" and to get on with the business of disarmament.⁴⁰

The Yap crisis was significant to the larger story of weakening American-Japanese relations before World War II. It illustrated the intensity of the rivalry between the two countries at a critical time and the new, almost

³⁹Department of State memorandum, 17 October 1921; and message to Japanese embassy, 18 October 1921, *FRUS, 1921*, 2:301–04; Hughes to Shidehara and Shidehara to Hughes, 11 February 1922, NA, RG59, M336, 862i.01/185; *Treaty Between the United States and Japan Regarding Rights of the Two Governments and Their Respective Nationals in Former German Islands in the Pacific Ocean North of the Equator, and in Particular the Island of Yap* (Washington, DC, 1922).

⁴⁰Arthur J. Balfour (Washington delegation) to the Marquess Curzon of Kedleston, 28 November 1921 and 14 January 1922; and Balfour to Lloyd George, 6 February 1922, in *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919–1939*, 14:519–21, 609–10, 643–45; Roger Louis, *British Strategy in the Far East, 1919–1939* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 2–3; Hosoya Chihiro, "Britain and the United States in Japan's View of the International System, 1919–37," in Ian Nish, ed., *Anglo-Japanese Alienation, 1919–1952* (Cambridge, UK, 1982), pp. 7–10; Ian Nish, *Alliance in Decline: A Study in Anglo-Japanese Relations, 1908–23* (London, 1972), pp. 368–82; Malcolm D. Kennedy, *The Estrangement of Great Britain and Japan, 1917–35* (Berkeley, CA, 1969), pp. 48–59.

subservient, role of the Western allies to these Pacific powers. The Yap issue also indicated the sudden importance of the Pacific islands in both diplomacy and military strategy. Yap did not bring America and Japan closer to the Second World War, but it did force diplomats on the two sides of the Pacific to realize that a remote tropical island of limited economic worth could lead nations to disaster. The Yap and Four-Power treaties temporarily ended the tensions surrounding the future of the Pacific islands, an uneasy situation that had lingered since the Japanese invasions of 1914. The ugly memories of the First World War had remained fresh in the minds of the diplomats who hoped to avoid yet another conflict. Even though the warlike atmosphere that accompanied the Yap crisis was denounced shortly after its resolution as silly and foolish by both the American press and some public officials, the continuing state of poor American-Japanese relations suggested that a future crisis was possible. The resolution of the Yap issue offered a precedent for peace.