

Micronesian Memories: Paving Over Paradise

by Eric Treisman

Former OEO lawyer on Yap

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Ask a Peace Corps volunteer why he or she is in Micronesia. The common answers are (with an ironic shrug and a wry smile): "Money and power, like all the other Americans," or (bristling) "What would *you* have us do, leave the field to the administration people?"

I find the second answer more ironic than the first. Every Peace Corps volunteer I know is filling an administration job slot. Bill Elwell, the Yap District Peace Corps director, says he would rather be known as the Peace Corps "agent" or "representative." "When I'm called 'director,' it indicates that I should exercise some supervisory function over the volunteers. That's not right. They are and should be responsible to the administrative department they're placed with, not to me."

The volunteers aren't in the executive positions, it's true. They don't make the mean decisions. They don't have anything to do with Yap's physical reconstruction, the progressive demolition of paths and villages, the constant knocking down of thatch and stone and putting up of plywood and concrete, the inexorable expansion of the trash enclave out from Colonia Town and Backhouse Bay. Most of the volunteers say they deplore these things.

But the Peace Corps is into social reconstruction. While the administration people spend their off hours visiting each other, playing bridge and drinking at O'Keefe's Oasis Club, the volunteers go out to teach the village children American games and stories and ethics and ways, while the village elders, ignored, shake their puzzled, powerless heads. And there are so many volunteers. There've been more than 250 in this district alone since 1967. The equivalent number of volunteers for India would be 19,000,000.

It seems obvious that neither the Peace Corps nor the Trust Territory administration really has much to offer these people. For my money, the breaking down of the physical and spiritual components of their society is sheer destruction.

Consider: two hundred years ago, before encounter and conquest, before Western diseases and methods of warfare took their toll, Micronesian technologies on Yap were supporting a population ten times today's.

Consider: by the statistics of the last two decades, a five-year-old Yapese has as great a life expectancy as a five-year-old American.

Consider the Yapese in their beautiful woven houses, cool and comfortable behind tall hibiscus-flower hedges along the quiet stone paths. Compare the pot-holed streets and overflowing gutters and tin-and-plywood slums of Guam. The village elders know a lot more than we do about making a life on a tiny tropic island.

But even now, the Trust Territory administration and the Peace Corps are making the destructive process irreversible. They're establishing an Ameri-Micronesian infra-structure and giving it the tools of the State—the police, the patronage—and replacing the village chiefs with it, the same way the Bureau of Indian Affairs replaced the Indian chiefs with tribal councils. They're doing it in the name of "preparing

the islanders for self-government," as if the islanders hadn't managed to govern themselves in their own ways for ten thousand years before the Spanish conquest.

The new shadow government is staffed with the Micronesians who started their American education when they were seven years old, who succeeded in that education enough to be sent to off-island boarding schools for more, who went on from the boarding schools to Guam or the University of Hawaii, and who "don't even give a stick to their old mother in the village"—the angry phrase Figimad once used to describe these men who've slipped the bonds of family, the bonds so central to the traditional culture, the men who've forgotten their people and the ways of their people because they've never been home since they were little boys. Coconuts: brown on the outside and white on the inside.

We used to hand-pick the staff of our shadow government. Now we let the Micronesians vote. It doesn't matter. They vote for the people who can deal with the Americans, only half-realizing that these people are dealing them out.

The largest irony is that the American dream the coconuts bought is our obsolescent '50s model, the one we ourselves are waking from. Watch them in the growing dispute over the new jetport: "We *must* have another airport, because we must *develop*," says Joachim Falmog, speaker of the Yap District legislature; and John Mangafel, Yap's representative in the Congress of Micronesia, seconds him: "We give this one top priority all the way, because it's a *development* project." And none of the district legislators and Congressmen of Micronesia are thinking to ask what's going to be developed (the tourist trade? Yap as a midnight refuel stop on a Tokyo-to-Melbourne night flight? Yap as a backup base for Guam's bombers, or a major base in a post-Vietnam-Taiwan-Okinawa defense perimeter?) and who's going to benefit (the Continental/Travelodge/Air Micronesia complex, and the brass from Saigon to the Pentagon) and what's being given up: peace and social consensus and *two percent of all their land area for this one project*. It's incredible, but the progress maniacs are even talking of using eminent domain to seize Rull's reef, now that all but eight adults in the municipality have signed a petition opposing the airport.

The coconuts believe they chose this airport for Yap by themselves. The District Administrator tells them they did, tells me they did. But I find it an odd coincidence, to say the least, that each of the six Districts happened to choose a new jetport as its top priority economic development project at the same time. Why didn't at least one District come up with a development project like electrification, or a water system, or harbors and fisheries? Why didn't even one District come up with something the people in the villages want, something they might use?

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From *Ramparts*, June 1972.

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suppressed by A. T. & T.

[AN OFFICE MEMORANDUM, DATED SEPTEMBER 24, 1971]

TO: Ted Mitchell, Director
Micronesian Legal Services
FROM: Attorney, Yap District
SUBJECT: Weekly case progress report

NEW CASES:

Abina v. O'Neal. When 3d Class Guardsman Tom O'Neal knocked up his Palauan girlfriend, he put in for an extension of his Yap tour. But Coast Guard Executive Officer [XO] Donald Boyd saw to it that no extension was granted, because (as he said) "it ain't good for our boys to be away from their own homes and people so long that they take up strange ways."

In fact, the XO arranged Tom's immediate transfer to Key West. Monday, Mary Abina found out he was leaving and paid a call on us. Monday evening I went out to the Coast Guard station and discussed things with Tom.

Tom is a very, very straight Georgia boy. He said, "The thing is she told me she'd eat them berries they got so she wouldn't have no baby."

I said, "You told her you'd marry her and take her back to the States. Why don't you quit arguing and do the least thing that's right?"

At first Tom pouted and scowled, but later he agreed to come into the office Tuesday and in principle to provide child support. "It's got to be in the morning, because they're shipping me out on the afternoon flight," he said; and he said he was glad I'd come after him, in a way, because he did want to do right by his kid.

When I got to the office Tuesday, the XO was there with Tom. The XO said, "Captain and I sat up late with this boy last night, cause we don't want him signing his life away. Now, Tom didn't even want me along this morning, but Captain *ordered* me to go, we're that worried for the boy.

"I ain't saying there's not guilt on one side or the other, or either side for that matter, but when you're out here long enough you'll get to know the way they do. These Palauan girls, babies don't mean nothing to them. They kill one the way you and I'd piss in the ocean.

"That baby's never going to see any money you want Tom to pay, because this girl's just going to send the baby home to mama in Palau the way they do, and the money's going to go for booze. . . .

"Say, these Palauan girls, they'd give their left arm to have a white baby. They would. I believe Mary here would pay Tom for it if she thought she had to. I believe she'd go out and rape four or five white guys to get a white baby, heh, heh, I'm just kidding when I put it that way and I don't mean no offense to Mary, hell, my girl's the same way."

While the XO was talking, Tom and Mary settled on \$40 a month for child support. I told them I would draft the agreement and I asked them to come back in an hour to sign—an obvious mistake, but I hadn't had my coffee yet.

She came back but he didn't. An hour before flight time, the XO drove up in a Coast Guard truck loaded with heavy equipment crates, the kind that come off each Coast Guard flight and litter the fields around Colonia. The bosun's mate was with him, having a hard time suppressing the giggles. The XO leaned out the door of the truck and shouted, "Tom's not coming. He changed his mind and he ain't going to sign nothing."

I went out to the airport. Tom wasn't there. The XO had parked his truck in the loading ramp, and after a while it occurred to me that I'd never seen crates go on the plane at Yap before; I'd only seen them offloaded. I walked over to the truck and yelled at the crates, "Tom, can you hear me?"

His muffled voice came back. "Yeah, you're the lawyer."

"I'm sorry you had to go out in a crate, Tom. I'm giving your agreement to your pilot. I want you to sign one copy and send it back to us and do what it says, and I sure hope you have a good flight."

The Trust Territory doctor was out at the airport for some reason, talking to the bosun and the XO. He sidled over during my conversation with Tom, and as I rode away I heard him yelling at the crates: "Paternity can be disproven by blood group analysis, Tom. There are thirteen legally recognized and about twenty-eight medically recognized groups, which . . ."

And it flashed on me that we'd just played some kind of mirror scene to the whole American Trust Territory. Out here to help people? Nonsense, we're out here to screw them; but it's all too blatant a farce even to be outrageous.

Incidentally, Figirmad and Gargog, as well as several Guardsmen who've stopped me on the road ("look, what if we bring in *six signed confessions* that we all did it with her . . .") say that if we get Mary her money we'll have a flood of Palauan girl clients that won't leave us time for anything else.

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Thank you.