Peleliu Invasion Beach

The Americanization of Micronesia: Paradise Lost

HILARY BEST WAS SIMPLY beside herself as she strolled across the stage, her blond bangs shimmering in the spotlights of the annual Miss Universe contest. Staring into the red eye of the TV camera, she burbled: "Why here I am, Miss Guam. Just think, we've always lived in New Jersey—I never even heard of Guam until two years ago. And now, all of this just because my daddy's in the Navy."

Miss Best is only one small example of the United States' arrogant gifts to Micronesia. Americans have also brought disease, Dairy Queens, and one of the most vital military staging areas in all of Southeast Asia to these haunting islands.

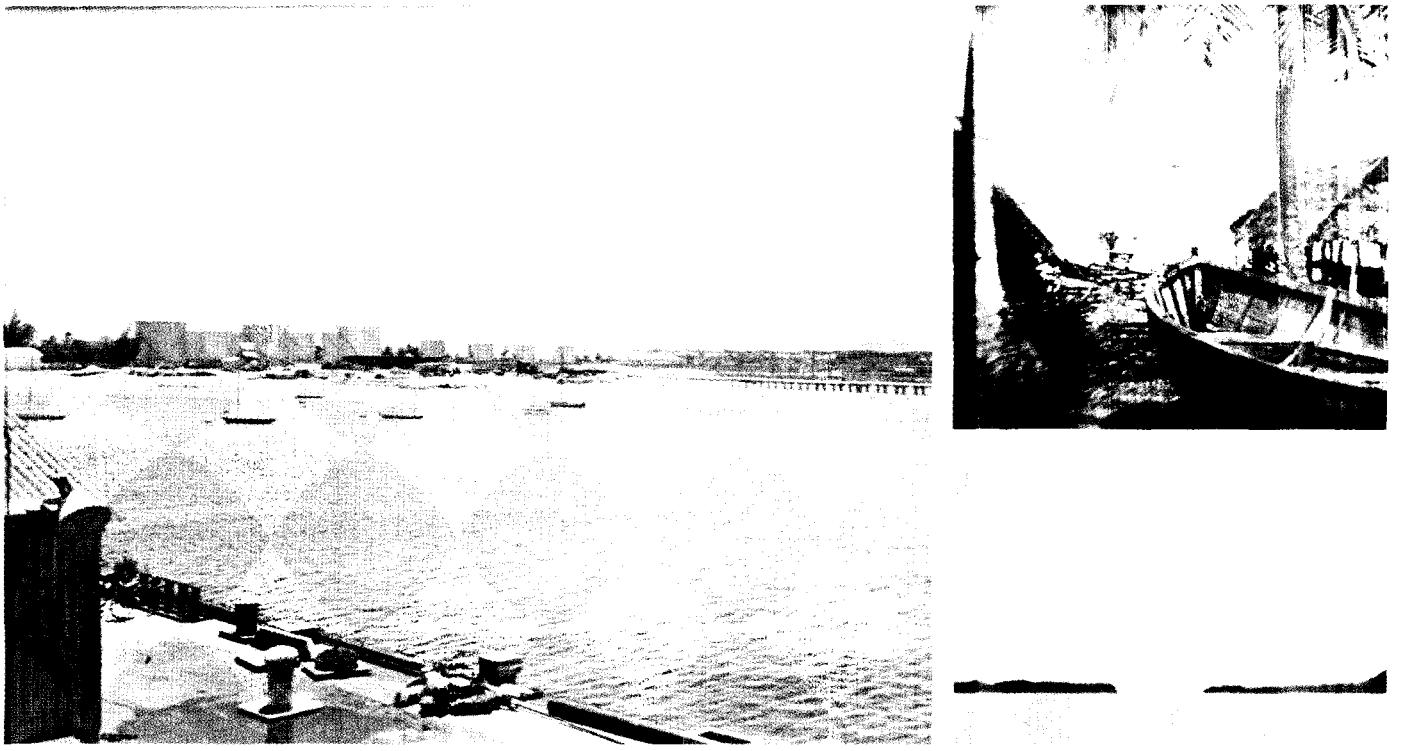
Micronesia, located 3000 miles west of Hawaii in the rolling expanse of the western Pacific, gives the U.S. a unique but little-publicized foothold in Asia. Sprinkled across three million square miles of ocean, the 2000 tiny islands have formed the United States Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. Nominally, the U.S. administers the islands as a Trust for the United Nations, not as a U.S. possession. But each of Micronesia's 100,000 inhabitants knows that the quality of his life depends less on his desires or those of the U.S. than on the whims of American civilian and military personnel. For 20 years following World War II, the U.S. first abused and later neglected the Micronesian people, leaving Micronesia as a military retreat where GIs might sample firsthand the sensual pleasures Gauguin discovered a century ago. Then suddenly in the late 1960s events in Vietnam and the Pacific rekindled America's interest in the islands for their strategic potential. A spate of "explanatory" visits began to whip up popular enthusiasm for the military's schemes. Simultaneously the Micronesians and their political leaders resolved to end their subservience to the U.S. and to preserve the remnants of their culture from inundation by the West. Today Micronesians find themselves and their islands arrayed as pawns on an oceanic chessboard as the U.S. prepares to expand her Pacific influence.

[DEALING IN A PACIFIC COLONY]

MICRONESIA'S KALEIDOSCOPIC colonial history began in the 1880s when Spain solidified her hold on the three great island chains of the Marianas, Carolines and Marshalls and their disparate peoples. After the War of 1898, America seized Guam and incorporated it as a full U.S. territory, and Germany

Photographs by the author

by Steve Murray



Kwajalein Missile Center

bought up the remaining islands in their best Teuton manner until 1914 when, to the mystification of the native islanders, another distant war brought another colonial master, this time the Japanese. The League of Nations awarded Micronesia as a mandate to Japan, which set about colonizing and exploiting the islands on a large scale. But ignoring the prohibitions of the Mandate Agreement, Japan fortified her colony and used Micronesian bases to launch attacks throughout the Pacific. True to the historic pattern, the new war brought a new ruler to Micronesia. It also brought death and devastation to the islands, as the United States wrested Japan's mandate from her in vicious campaigns that gave America a brand new set of obscure battleplaces: Kwajalein, Eniwetok, Saipan, Truk and Peleliu. Micronesians met their new conquerors passively, surveyed their ravaged lands, contrasted the characteristics of the Americans with those of the deposed Japanese (the size of the Americans' feet drew much comment) and wondered what to expect from the new U.S. naval administration that came to rule them.

It didn't take long to find out. War debris was cleaned up only where scrap metal contractors could make a wide profit, and the Micronesians had to fend for themselves on islands littered with vast explosive dumps. Nobody received restitution for war damages. Even after the fighting stopped, the islanders' villages were torn apart as U.S. forces built military facilities wherever they wished. Generally they chose large, level areas—precisely those lands most valuable to Micronesians for homesites and for producing agricultural staples like taro, yams and tapioca. Taktai Chin, a small entrepreneur who for years was shunted from island to island, describes naval construction at Peleliu when he returned there after the American invasion: "I saw [the U.S. military] bulldozing former farm and agricultural land, removing the topsoil and covering the ground with coral. I also saw bulldozers knocking down standing houses, destroying standing trees and crops. . . . I observed the entire island bare of vegetation, trees and crops. Coral covered almost the entire island and the glare hurt my eyes." The people of Palau and the Marianas have finally had to petition Japan and the U.S. for $80 million in damages, 25 years after the end of the war.

A month *after* the Japanese surrender, the U.S. Navy deliberately leveled the city of Koror, the former Japanese administrative capital. Bulldozers wrecked scores of buildings, offices, laboratories and homes; they dug up surfaced roads and crushed water facilities. The Navy commander never bothered with an explanation; he just promised—and continued to promise—new building materials.

With the Micronesians' attention sufficiently diverted locally, the U.S. government set about stacking the diplomatic deck to gain secure territorial title. Since American wartime assurances claimed we sought no territorial gain, Truman's men haggled tirelessly at the United Nations in 1947 to ratify American control and proclaim Micronesia a Trust Territory under U.S. administrative authority. But ours was a unique arrangement: ever conscious of Micronesia's strategic location, the U.S. pressured the UN into declaring the islands a "strategic trust" in which we could build any military installations necessary for "the maintenance of international peace and security." The UN established ten other trust territories, but none were "strategic trusts." Further, while each of the other administering nations ultimately was responsible to the UN General Assembly, the U.S. answered only to the Security Council, where we conveniently can veto any policy we oppose. Blithely America accepted the UN's charge to promote the political development of the people toward "self-government or independence" and to advance their social, economic and educational well-being.

[THE STAKES: H-BOMBS, MISSILES AND LAND GRABS]

IT TOOK ONLY FIVE MONTHS after the signing of the Trusteeship Agreement for the U.S. to get down to business. The taste of Hiroshima still hot on its lips, the military had to find a place to start its bomb tests. They chose a tiny atoll called Eniwetok in the Marshall Islands, and immediately the entire population was rounded

'alau District

Palau District

'alau District

up and removed. Without legal counsel and given no choice in the matter, the Eniwetokians signed a contract of consent which never was translated into their own language. They were sent to an isolated, rat-infested island with resources so meager that the people were plunged into mass malnutrition, cut off from their homeland and devoid of vital governmental services. The people of Bikini got the same kind of treatment before an H-bomb leveled their island. To compensate, the U.S. invested a total of $450,000 in U.S. government securities, generously doling out the interest to the uprooted Marshallese.

However, the seed of early American policy in Micronesia grew on Kwajalein island and the nearby islet of Ebeye where the U.S. built a guided missile test center. The chance to earn a cash wage drew hundreds of Marshallese from neighboring islands. Eventually the military built a ghetto for the laborers and their families on Ebeye, a scrap of land one-tenth of a mile square, three miles away. When the Army expanded the Nike missile program to include interception of ICBMs fired from California, it stacked the slums a little higher with island populations that had to be moved from the path of falling debris. By the late 1960s, 3800 people competed for living space on Ebeye. Startled in their innocence, the military disclaims any responsibility for conditions on Ebeye—it's just the old story of supply and demand.

What has the U.S. supplied to these two islands? A typical child on Ebeye lives in a shantytown, faces endless epidemics, receives occasional education and health care, and exists irremediably cut off from his ancestral life style and independence. His father working on Kwajalein deals with an additional gift of American import: Jim Crow. There American personnel live in a neat, air-conditioned community that combines Leisure World with Brave New World. Americans shop at a PX and buy fresh lettuce flown in from Hawaii; they ride in taxis for free, bowl for free, go deep-sea fishing for free. The finest of educational and health facilities are theirs, and they make fat salaries, augmented by allowances to soften the strain of living in a hardship location. Micronesians on the base work mostly as domestics. They commute from Ebeye. Until just recently they could neither ride in taxis nor buy anything in the stores. Kwajalein even closed its modern hospital to Ebeye residents three miles away, so that a seriously ill Marshallese would have to be flown 1500 miles to Guam for treatment.

Most of the remaining Micronesians have escaped the military depredations that befell their brethren in the Marshalls. In 1951 the Navy relinquished control of the Trust Territory to the Interior Department, chiefly because Interior showed it could administer the islands for no more than the $5–7 million a year spent by the Navy. For the next decade this miserly annual appropriation had to provide for all governmental operations and services in the Trust Territory, including health, education, transportation, economic development and all governmental salaries. Almost complete stagnation followed throughout the islands, and the Micronesians were frustrated in every effort to participate in the modern world. They had no control of their affairs. All power rested with an American High Commissioner, who took his cues from Washington. Below him in each of the six administrative districts—the Marshalls, Marianas, Ponape, Truk, Yap and Palau—an American District Administrator ruled his own fief, responsible only to the High Commissioner. Unwilling to help Micronesia herself, the U.S. effectively sealed off the islands from outside influences by prohibiting almost any investment or visitors. Nor could many Micronesians get out: with no capital, economic opportunities were nil, and since the Trust Territory had only two high schools, few people had any chance for advanced education.

One notable exception stands out on Saipan, in the Marianas. The CIA gave the Saipanese their chance to contribute to "international peace and security" by transforming one-half of their island into a super-secret training base for Chinese Nationalists who planned assaults on mainland China. For the entire 13 years of the project's existence, the Saipanese were denied access to the half of their island utilized by the Americans and Chinese. Probably because of the dual

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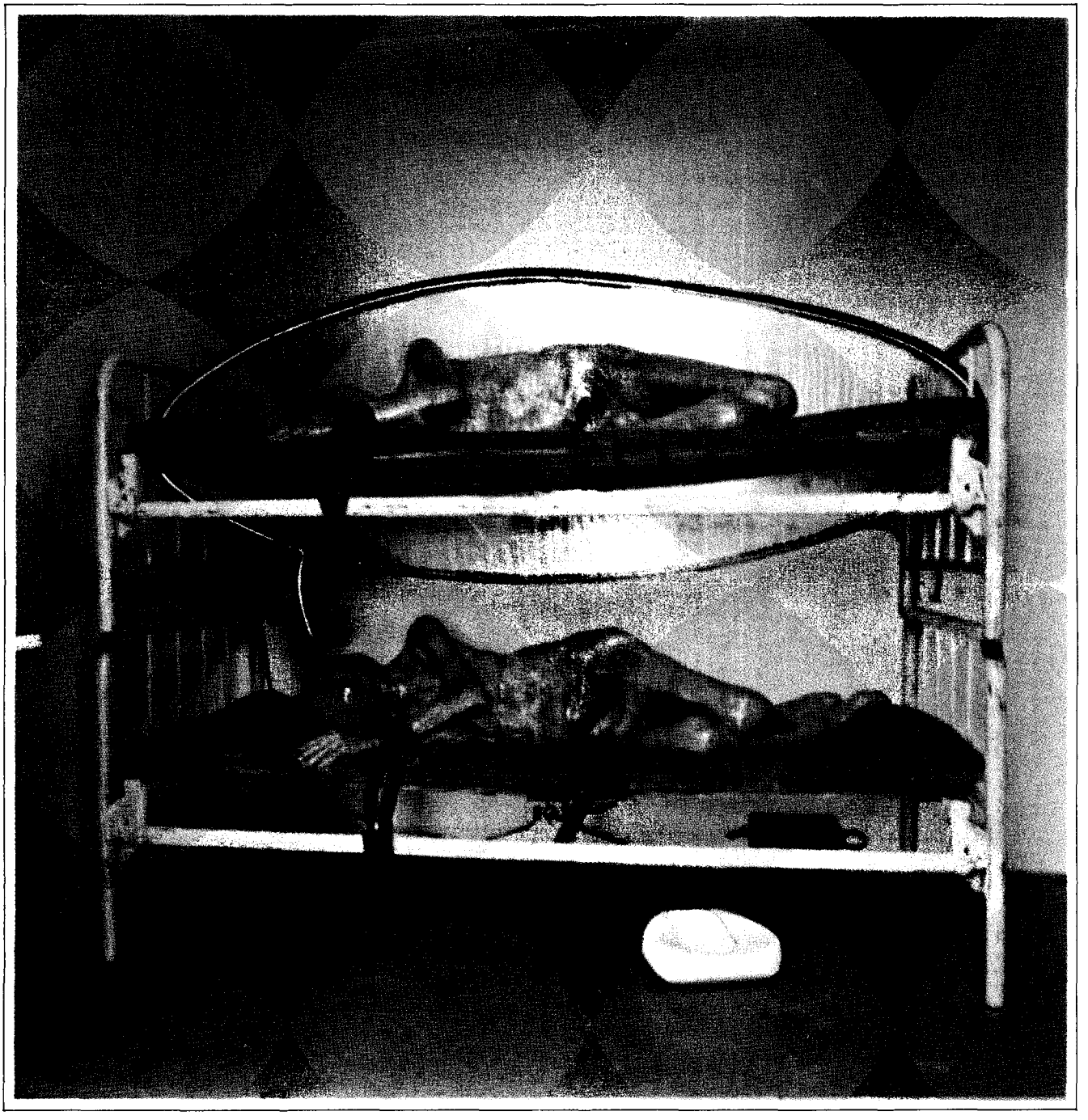
The Mental Health Industry:

This Way Lies Madness



Edward Kienholz/Courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum, "American Sculpture of the Sixties"