

MICRONESIAN

JOURNAL OF THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Vol. 4, n° 1

Dry Season Issue

June 2004

BOOK REVIEW

Howard P. Willens and Dirk A. Ballendorf (2004) *The Secret Guam Study*. Guam and Saipan: Published by the Micronesian Area Research Center and The Northern Mariana Islands Division of Historic Preservation.
239pp . ISBN 1-878-453-77-7

reviewed by

Samuel F. MacPhetres
Northern Marianas College, Saipan

This small but information packed volume was written by two people who were in excellent positions to gather hitherto classified information and put it together in a comprehensible and digestible fashion. Howard P. Willens is a Washington, DC attorney who was legal counsel for the Marianas Political Status Commission from 1972 through the completion of negotiations which created the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands in the political union with the United States of America. He was also legal counsel for the first and third CNMI constitutional conventions. He is the author of two volumes on Marianas political status¹ which are the fundamental documents necessary for anyone wishing to understand the genesis of the only US Commonwealth still in existence². Dr. Dirk Ballendorf is a professor at the University of Guam and director of the Micronesian Area Research Center (MARC) which specializes in research throughout Micronesia.

Dr. Ballendorf filed the freedom of information request to free up several volumes of classified documents which had been tucked

away in a small safe in the bowels of the Interior Department since 1975. Attorney Willens and his wife Attorney Deanne Siemer were legal counsel to Dr. Ballendorf and did the footwork (voir keeping the pressure on the Washington agencies to release the information and documents from frequently reluctant bureaucrats).

The results, *The Secret Guam Study*, is a multifaceted overview of the federal bureaucracy and the status of the various territories (non-states) under the sovereignty of United States of America.³

Having lived in the proximity of Guam and on the island of Saipan for over 30 years and having attempted on several occasions to publish materials dealing with these islands, I would have to say that this book probably will not find a very wide audience. That said, however, it has some essential values which should be highlighted and persuade professors of American history and government to keep it in a prominent location on their in use bookshelf.

I refer to two related approaches to this volume. The first is the actual story of how

This contribution is not peer-reviewed.

© *Micronesian Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* ISSN 1449-7336
Letao Publishing, PO Box 3080, Albury NSW, Australia

Guam did not receive the same advantageous relationship with the federal government that the Northern Marianas (then a district in the Trust Territory the Pacific Islands) achieved through direct negotiations with the federal government between 1972 and 1975. It is frequently subject of wonder when an American citizen, or even an international tourist, travels between the two jurisdictions. Both fly the American flag and the citizens of both are US citizens. However, a comparison frequently ends there. Travel between the two requires a US passport or in the case of tourists, a passport and visa issued in the country of origin. Entry into the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands USA is not entry into United States, no visa is required. Guam is a point of entry and US visas are required where applicable. One could go on but the main point is why do these two American island jurisdictions, so close together, have such different relationships with the federal government (and each other)?

The Willens/ Ballendorf exposé reveals in great detail how this came about and how it could have been different. For that alone, and the hundred or so pages of declassified documents that make up the appendices, the book is a fascinating insight into federal attitudes towards the territories, the geopolitical climate of the times and leading personalities of the period. This reason alone I would strongly recommend the volume as required reading in any advanced Pacific Islands studies program.

In an almost totally different perspective, coming from one who has been teaching American Government on Saipan for many years, I find this volume to be extremely useful as a case study in the larger context of how decisions are made (or avoided) at the federal level. After reading the book and trying to connect the dots between the Interior Department, the State Department, the White House, and the Defense Department one comes away with much more appreciation for the complexity of federal decision-making on a scale that is manageable. The wealth of detail, the inclusion of the declassified documents, and the way the material is held in together in the text would give even a beginning student a

greater appreciation of the complexity of the federal bureaucracy and how decisions are made. It presents not just the input of political leaders but also that of the backroom bureaucrats who need to put the memoranda together, circulate them for clearances and amendments and reassemble them time and time again before they ever go to the President for final signature, that is assuming all departments involved can come to a general agreement. All too frequently, however, irreconcilable competing and conflicting interests is the reason decisions are not made in areas not involving immediate national security.

In this approach, the general American studies approach, the Guam study presents an excellent case study from which to approach other perhaps greater issues.

Because the study reveals the reasons why Guam did not receive Commonwealth status and the various dynamics involved, it does tend to encourage certain groups, particularly on Guam, to try to revive the “quest for Commonwealth” which has, for all practical purposes, come to a dead end. From my own perspective, I believe it would be a misallocation of time to believe that the wrongs committed in the mid-70s could be corrected in today’s political structure of the United States. Guam has been an American territory for over 100 years and subject to the full jurisdiction of the U.S. Constitution for over 50 years. It is very difficult to visualize the federal government agreeing to give Guam control over immigration, minimum wage, and a variety of the other unique provisions contained in the Commonwealth Covenant in today’s world. At the time of the negotiations between the Marianas in the federal government the Northern Marianas was a district In the Trust Territory the Pacific Islands under a trusteeship agreement with United Nations which meant that US sovereignty did not apply. Under those circumstances nearly anything could have been negotiated since the Marianas was considered as possessing inherent sovereignty and capable of negotiating as an equal with United States government. This is the reason for the important exceptions to the application of US law and Constitution which exist in the Commonwealth

today. In addition, the federal government's experience over the past 25 years of dealing with a Commonwealth with its special privileges would, I would venture to say, preclude extending the same privileges to any other territory. Pragmatically speaking, over the long-term, the opposite would probably be true. Should statehood ever become an option, which is not unthinkable, a reunion between Guam and the Northern Marianas would probably be a requirement. Homeland security considerations could also have an impact on the Commonwealth status. (That's another book).

That said, *The Secret Guam Study* is an extremely valuable and useful tool for understanding the political process with all its warts and blemishes included or maybe because the warts and blemishes are exposed for all to see. As a teaching/learning device the prudent students can come away from this volume knowing what to look for and how to interpret what they see coming out of Washington with much greater understanding.

NOTES

¹ Willens and Siemer: National Security and Self-Determination, United States Policy in Micronesia) (Praeger, 2000) & An Honorable Accord (Uof Hawaii Press, PIMS 18, 2002)

² The Philippines was classified as an American Commonwealth from 1905 until independence in 1946 and Puerto Rico is called a Commonwealth in English but a freely associated state when speaking Spanish (Estado Libre Asociado).

³ These include the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico in the Caribbean and American Samoa, Guam and (but not normally termed a territory) the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. These are the inhabited territories with constitutional governments under federal jurisdiction.