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The American Image

P. O. Box 628,
Port Moresby,
Papua,
Territory of Papua
& New Guinea

December 29, 1968

Mr. Richard H. Nolte,
Executive Director,
Institute of Current World Affairs,
535 Fifth Avenue,
New York 10017, New York,
United States of America

Dear Mr. Nolte,

Probably only a very few Americans realise that they share a common border with Papua and New Guinea, or, more precisely, that the United States Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands does. If, as seems likely, the United States Trust Territory does eventually become a Hawaian satellite, or enters into some other form of close association with the American union, this common border may begin to mean something to Americans. Although disputes over the border's demarcation are unlikely, the United States will still probably have a vested interest in Papua and New Guinea's stability, if only to avert the emergence of a power vacuum here.

If comparatively few Americans seem conscious of their historic ties with Papua and New Guinea, the same is not true of the populace here. The aim of this 'Newsletter', then, is to examine some aspects of the American image in Papua and New Guinea.

Nu Gini Toktok is a Pidgin weekly, and the only newspaper in the Territory that is regularly published in any language other than English. Only rarely does it carry any overseas news, and then only in the form of space-fillers at the bottom of columns, etc. The recent presidential election in America, however, provided the occasion for a noteworthy departure from the rule when the leading story on page one on Friday November 15 was headlined:

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MR RICHARD

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PRESIDEN

The story was written in the best "Lady Hamilton once slept here" tradition (my translation):

> Washington: This man who worked and fought in Bougainville during World War II has become President of the United States of America.
>
> The man's name is Mr Richard Milhous Nixon...

President-elect Nixon, local pundits recalled, will be the first American president since the late John F. Kennedy to have served in the New Guinea area, although President Johnson did serve in the Southwest Pacific area early in the war.

The story had a "damp squib" ending, however, for when a "chaser" was sent out for the wire service to check just what Mr. Nixon had done here one of his spokesmen allowed that the President-elect did not remember a great deal about Bougainville, nor could he remember any of the local people he had met here. Clearly, one of the partners to what may one day become "our close and historic ties of friendship" did not know (or care?) a great deal about them.

The first large-scale American impact on Papua and New Guinea came during World War II. Prior to that, the United States had only had an indirect influence on the area, through the precedent it set its Australian emulators who sought the proclamation of an Australian Monroe Doctrine over the whole of the Southwest Pacific, and through President Wilson's resistance to the hectoring demands of William Morris Hughes, the Australian Prime Minister, at Versailles that the former German New Guinea be annexed to Australia. The 'C' class mandate that Australia won was an uneasy compromise between Hughes's desire for outright annexation and Wilson's commitment to control by what The Bulletin, one of the original voices of Australian nationalism, described as "a buzzing many-headed committee" of "The League of Platitudes". Presumably, however, the two territories received their fair share of American visitors, as research-workers, missionaries, miners and traders, during this period, although their names have never been collated.

World War II marked an important turning-point in the Territory's race relations. For the first time, Papuans and New Guineans met Europeans who did not share the colour and status prejudices of the pre-war settlers. Especially puzzling were the Americans.

It came as something of a shock to many Australians after the war to discover that many New Guineans now classified Europeans into several different categories: Siermans (Germans), Ingglis (which included the British and Australians), and Amrika (Americans), who, amazingly, had been accompanied by some Afrika or bilak Amrika (Negroes). For the first time, many Papuans and New Guineans saw black men who dressed, worked, and had much the same skills, as Europeans, and who even mixed more or less freely with them. The general category of wetman (white men) was divided into two: Ingglis, who were of the type of the hard, pre-war masta; and Amrika, who treated the indigenes more humanely, and which category included the nicer sort of Australians.

The huge quantities of war materials that the Americans brought with them as well as their attitudes amazed many New Guineans, and the impact they created still remains. They added a whole new dimension to New Guinea's history as seen through indigenous eyes, and gave to it a pointed coherence that unnerves many Australians.

The version repeated below is taken from an article in New Guinea (Volume 2, Number 1, page 57), but it resembles very closely the sort of story to be heard in many parts of the old war zone:

> God sent the Germans to New Guinea and told them to help us. They were before my time but my father told me about them. Because they were bad and wicked God told the Australians to send them away. The Australians got rid of the Germans but the Australians were not much better. They did not return out lands and they were sometimes cruel and beat us. God decided to punish the Australians and told the Japanese to come here. The Japanese were cruel and treated us badly and God decided to give the Australians another chance by sending the Americans, their clansmen, to help them beat the Japanese. After the war the Australians were much better and said they would help us and give us roads, hospitals, schools and things to grow. They have only done a little of this and now the Americans are coming here again to see whether the Australians are doing what they promised.

Curiously, at the same time as many Papuans and New Guineans saw America as their deliverer, the most reactionary of the Territory's European settlers, then evacuated to Australia, were considering an appeal to the United States to save them from the "woolly-haired anthropologists and theorists" in Canberra who were then planning the post-war reconstruction of the Territory, and seemed likely to include some provision for "native welfare and development" in their plans.

Since the war, the American impact has been relatively slight, but nonetheless significant. Many Americans have come here as missionaries, and, for no very obvious reason, they have distinguished themselves from their Australian counterparts in a way that seems particularly important to many indigenes - they have tended to learn the local language of the areas in which they work. Perhaps they are more intelligent, have more time and money, or are just less ethnocentric, than Australians, but American missionaries in the Highlands especially are justly famous for their linguistic skill. Indeed, when other people seek to learn a local vernacular, or show some interest in an area's traditional culture, the first question usually is - "Are you American?" When staying in a village, I find that working for an American institution is a useful explanation of why I want to stay there.

Lest Americans take too much heart from this trend, however, it seems worthwhile to point out that there is a rather less rational side to the foregoing picture. Among some of the Kamano of the Eastern Highlands, for example, there is some uncertainty about Americans. All of the Americans they have met have been missionaries who have learnt their language (usually as part of their work translating the Bible into the vernacular for the Summer Institute

of Linguistics). When pressed, they admit to some mystification: do all Americans speak Kamano as a second language?

"America" has a millenarian meaning for many Papuans and New Guineans. They remember the vast wealth, the huge quantities of material goods possessed by the American troops, and they see pictures of the United States. They have rather complex hopes and dreams about this "America". "America" to them is a fabled land of wealth and plenty, to which they may one day gain access if the Australians can somehow be circumvented.

During the 1964 House of Assembly election, a group of people on New Hanover refused to vote unless they could vote for President Johnson. The "Johnson cult" as it was called collected money allegedly to buy President Johnson from the American people (although the Pidgin translation of such an idea is probably not incompatible with their just wanting to buy him a ticket to come to New Guinea). The whole movement was widely regarded as but another attempt by a group of New Guineans to find the magical key to the apparent wealth and power of the white man.

After the first meeting of the new legislature, one awed Highlands member returned to his electorate proclaiming that he had been to America. The local American missionaries were horrified at such a blatant untruth and tried to tell the people that he was lying. But he was lying only in a very narrow sense of the word: he had flown for the first time by aeroplane to a distant town (Port Moresby), had descended down through the clouds to see more cars, houses and Europeans than he had ever believed could exist, had received an unheard of salary for his pains, and had even met the Governor-General of Australia. Was this not truly "America"?

The member for a neighbouring constituency took rather longer to return from Port Moresby. On his way home the road was lined with many hundreds of people, all eager to hear from the bewildered politician whether he had been to "America" too - he had not.

The United States itself amazes those few Papuans and New Guineans who do actually get there by its size, its wealth, the bustle, and the comparative social equality and affluence of America's Negroes (relative to the status of most Papuans and New Guineans). One or two I have known to visit there (usually they go there for United Nations or other international conferences and courses) have failed to "relate" at all. The less sophisticated among them have only finally realised that they were not dreaming when they visited a pig farm - still of unheard of proportions - or an equivalent institution for which they have some referent back home. Some return home bewildered and disturbed, intent on finding the mystic key to what makes Americans so rich, powerful and knowledgeable. The better-educated among them, of course, take America in their stride, just as they once accepted Australia before that.

An increasing number of Papuans and New Guineans are now visiting Hawaii on a variety of grants from the East-West Center there. Many indigenous politicians are pressing the Australian government to open the floddgates to the American Peace Corps, which is bigger, better trained and more professional than its Australian and British counterparts, which are allowed here now. American culture, per medium of Time, Newsweek and Playboy (which is less regularly banned here than in Australia) is spreading, while Ebony arouses a certain amount of nervous curiosity. Names like that of the late Senator Robert Kennedy (whose death is the only one to date other than that of Territory politicians to be marked by the House of Assembly) caused some excitement among the better-eduaated townsmen.

Americans need, nonetheless, to be careful of their image. At present, America arouses little envy here; it tends to represent a hope to just those people who are most disillusioned with Australians. "Communism" is just a rather frightening word of abuse, especially as its representatives are consistently denied entry here by the Australian government. The too lavish display of American affluence, however, could turn fascination to fear or dislike, and some Papuans and New Guineans are already speculating uncertainly about the possibilities of playing the non-alignment-for-foreign-aid game, firstly, some of them think, between Australia and America, and then with those two against.... Further, some of the early proponents of secessionism in the New Guinea islands are looking north with interest, dreaming perhaps of a link-up with some of the more southerly islands of the United States Trust Territory, but not necessarily under America.

If Americans need to be rather wary of their image here, for their popularity is not always rationally based, they need to be careful too that their way of solving colonial problems is not too strongly urged upon Australians. A country with a population of America's size can afford to attempt to absorb a Puerto Rico, and perhaps its Pacific island territories too. It has the financial and other resources seemingly to swamp American Samoa and Hawaii, culturally as well as politically. Australia lacks both the population numbers and the financial resources to attempt an American type solution here, and probably lacks, above all, the racial tolerance to make even a Puerto Rican solution acceptable to the majority of Australians, much less politically marketable in Papua and New Guinea or at the United Nations.

Yours Sincerely,

Edward Wolfers.

Received in New York January 6, 1969.