

**POLITICAL ATTEMPTS TO  
DEFEND THE ENVIRONMENT:  
A PACIFIC ISLAND CASE**

**JOSHUA EPSTEIN, PH.D.**

*New York State Department of  
Environmental Conservation  
Stony Brook, New York\**

**ABSTRACT**

How can Palauans, inhabitants of a small island group in the western Pacific, protect their environment from an array of complex threats? The present article examines the strengths and weaknesses of Palauan strategies in this regard. These illustrate the importance of political and socio-economic factors, gaps between relatively short-term considerations and long-term goals, and the maturation of Palau's environment and development dilemma. A number of roughly sequential events in Palau's recent history provide the case material. These start with the controversy over whether to locate a "superport" for oil in Palau, during the mid-to-late 1970s. Palau's emergence, in 1981, as a constitutional republic is the last event covered. The reader is also updated on subsequent events. Palau's characteristics were described in the author's first article, printed in the previous edition of the *Journal of Environmental Systems* [1]. The last article will discuss the instructive parallels between Palau's dilemma, and the nuclear and environmental problems that face us all.

How can the inhabitants of an island group safeguard their environment in the face of complex threats? Particularly from the mid-1970s, the Palau Islands, which are the westernmost in the United States Trust Territory of the Pacific, have been the target of ambitious and foreign-oriented development schemes. While these have promised economic and other benefits for at least some Palauans, the environmental costs could be steep indeed. This article examines the strengths and limitations of Palauan strategies to deal with the spasmodic threats, seductive pressures, and long-range challenges to Palauans' natural and social environment. Our focus starts with the controversy over whether to

\* This article was written before the author's association with the NYSDEC began, and should not be taken as any reflection on DEC views and/or policies.

locate a massive oil and transshipment facility in the Palau Islands. This erupted during the mid-1970s, and was referred to as the “superport” controversy. Treatment ends with the emergence of Palau as a constitutional republic, in 1981. In May of that year the author left Palau, after more than eighteen months of continuous fieldwork. The reader will be updated on crucial events.

The description and analysis presented was preceded by the author’s article which provided background on Palau’s physical and social characteristics, including the complex interactions with a succession of foreign powers [1]. Attention was paid to the multi-faceted, ambivalent, and even conflicted relationship that developed between Palau and the United States after World War Two. Particularly from the 1960s, the United States has flooded Palau with torrents of economic and other forms of “assistance.” This in turn has supported Palauans’ adoption of representative democracy, increased opportunities for western education, for travel beyond the Islands, and for the elaboration of a largely unproductive and consumer-oriented economy. The not-so-hidden agenda on the part of the United States has been to woo the good will, or at least toleration, of Palauans as regards the American military’s use of the islands. If actualized, such a usage could massively degrade Palauan resources. Palauans have become uncomfortably aware of this.

Even without such a usage, Palau’s lack of an economic base, relative powerlessness, and Palau’s other vulnerabilities have meant that the islands remain subject to damage from various possible development schemes. Nonetheless, and at least in the short run, Palau’s increasing dependent affluence and political democracy has been providing comfort for many. In general, from the end of World War Two through the 1960s, Palauans did not seem overly concerned that their distinctive and nonproductive development path might fall prey to alluring and/or intrusive interests. Palauans’ sense of ease was rudely shaken, however, by the prospect of a superport development. This provoked unprecedented controversy within and beyond the Islands.

## PALAUAN STRATEGIES

The concept for a superport was instigated by an international entrepreneur named Robert Panero. In 1975, he submitted a study to the Imperial Government of Iran, in which he urged the development of a massive port facility for oil, to be located in the western Pacific. Given the magnitude of the plan, Panero felt that it should be pursued by an international consortium of nations, led by an oil-producing one such as Iran. The project might also satisfy the increasing oil needs of Southeast Asia and the Pacific rim, especially Japan [2].

The details of the superport plans went through a number of changes. Anticipated “spin off” industries that could possibly spring from the project’s oil storage and transshipment function included other petro-chemical activities, a steel mill, and perhaps a nuclear power plant.

Though the project promised substantial economic benefits for outsiders, and possibly for some Palauans, a number of potentially crucial unknowns were also involved. For instance, superport construction and operation might entail that Palauans lose control over, and free access to, one-third of the Island's land. Moreover, perhaps 10 percent of the Palauan population would have to be relocated to make way for a superport [3].

In contrast to the uncertainties connected with the human dimension, there was little doubt that the environment effects of the project could be devastating. Among other things, there was the danger of oil spilling from supertankers, while outside the port. Some of the ultra large crude carrying (ULCC) tankers were 1,400 feet long, and took a mile to stop. They had run aground on shoals and reefs, and had even collided with other tankers. The first big oil spill was from the notorious Torrey Canyon debacle, which blackened beaches on the French and British coast in 1967. As of 1978, there had been sixty other major oil spills worldwide [2, p. 31].

In addition to such oil spills, the construction of an oil-port usually results in heavy siltation, which can smother and kill a reef. Moreover, if superport construction escalated into a major industrial complex, then thermal, air, heavy metal, and even nuclear pollution could be involved [2, p. 33].

Opposition to the port emerged virtually simultaneously among some western educated and internationally-exposed Palauans, and from American and international environmentalist groups. In fact, before the controversy was over, the Sierra Club, the National and World Wildlife Fund, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, many other environmental groups, and some scientific ones, expressed their opposition to the port.

Elements of the indigenous opposition to the proposed port can be traced back to some Palauans who attended American colleges and universities during the late 1960s and early 1970s. During their stays, some of these Palauans became aware of activist environmental conflicts in the United States. For instance, one such Palauan went to a university in Montana, where he saw the cutting of timber and its processing through pulp mills. He reported to the author how such activity would "stink up the whole place, but if you shut [the pulp mill] down, then the [town] will be clean, but there will be no jobs." Similarly, the choice for Palauans over the superport proposal could be phrased in terms of fueling the economy or preserving the environment. In Palau, however, this dilemma would be especially difficult. After all, the proposed economic stimulus was foreign-inspired and might well be foreign-controlled. Moreover, the benefits for some, as well as the possibilities of damage to other Palauans and to the environment, were all quite marked.

By the mid-1970s, activist-influenced Palauans had returned to the Islands, and had developed their own organization and newspaper. They sought to reach out to "ordinary" Palauans, through extra-kin and extra-regional appeals, and regarded the threat posed by the anticipated oil project as an unprecedented political opportunity.

In 1976, Palau's High Chief Ibedul,<sup>1</sup> who was himself rather young and who had received international exposure in the U. S. Army, agreed to be Chairman of the Save Palau Organization (SPO). The SPO was formed by Palauans to fight the superport. Though Palauan activists had been instrumental, the organization also embraced some other Palauans who, though anti-superport, were not necessarily strong supporters of the activists.

A Palauan informant, who had been a teacher at an elementary school in a village where superport activities would be concentrated, described the process of stimulating village-level opposition to the project. The villagers did not have a clear concept of such a technologically-complex and massive project. However, some of them did remember the large Japanese ships anchored around Palau during World War Two, and the damage that was inflicted by American bombing. Activists also compared the size of supertankers to Palau's "KB" bridge (790'), a well-known landmark and largest architectural structure in the Islands.

Many men in the villages fish, and women gather food from the sea. Activists explained how superport development could adversely affect the ocean, reefs, and lagoons. They also showed films produced by foreign idealists that dramatized negative environmental impacts in other lands, such as reefs destroyed by siltation in Hawaii. The technique then was to compare the damage envisioned from anticipated superport developments to objects that Palauans could actually see, and to events which they, or relevant others, had historically experienced. This technique would be used again (as discussed later).

Palauans attempting to arouse concern about the superport had to deal with the public's parochialism, which was pronounced in rural areas. Though characteristically fascinated by relevant external developments, villagers still tended to think of Palau as the center of the universe. This is not surprising, given that in old Palau, both the world and human society were seen as originating near the Islands. This view, though culturally well-grounded, does not mesh easily with an informed response to a superport, particularly to its international and even global dimensions. To help overcome this impediment, activists would show villagers a large map on which they pointed out how the Palau Islands are just tiny dots, especially in comparison with huge and powerful nations. Activists at the village level also made specific efforts to explain to high-status village elders about the anticipated, harmful effects.

In addition to their internal efforts, by 1976-77 Palauan anti-superport forces had forged a link with sympathetic outsiders. The Palauans appeared at numerous forums outside their Islands. The remarks of High Chief Ibedul, at the 1977 Oceanic Society symposium, held in San Francisco, were typical [4]. He pictured Palau as in a David and Goliath contest, in which the odds were overwhelmingly against Palau. He suggested that superport developers viewed

<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, Palau had two high chiefs, who led competing district confederacies. These leaders still wield considerable influence, which the Ibedul has combined with contemporary qualifications.

Palau as a “dumping ground” for pollution that was no longer being tolerated in the industrialized world. He added that probably outsiders, not Palauans, would gain the major benefits from the project, and he warned that any material benefits could not outweigh the environmental destruction and “cultural pollution” that would be spread by a virtual army of foreign workers.<sup>2</sup> The Ibedul was also disturbed by the impression that Palau’s options were being “conditioned” by powerful outsiders. The Ibedul feared that elements of Palau’s legislature, in conjunction with some Palauan businessmen and predatory outside forces, might encourage superport development with little input from most Palauans, or even against their will [4, p. 19]. Palauans might even become a minority in their own Islands,<sup>3</sup> through a process that would inevitably result in an “. . . erosion of Palauan identity . . .,” to be replaced by western materialism and greed.

Consciously or not, along with the substantive concerns, there was a manipulative tinge to the Palauan appeals. Over-simplified and idealized images of Palau were being projected to secure an intended, political effect. Palauan interest, and skill at this, has long been characteristic.

As the superport issue peaked, there were a number of avenues to resolve it. The mechanics need not detain us here. Suffice to say, that by the end of the controversy, the anticipated sociopolitical, economic, and especially environmental damage that was expected were seen as far too great.

The impressive communicative/mobilization efforts of anti-superport Palauans, their sophisticated external appeals, the coordination between these, and certain international factors,<sup>4</sup> aborted the superport project. Furthermore, through a process of reactive clarification, Palauans had gained a clearer understanding of what they did not want. Development that would be elitist, foreign-oriented, rapid and massive, and badly disrupt the environment, was not wanted. Attention must also be paid to the limitations of the anti-superport strategy, however.

Though successful in blocking the port, the anti-superport campaign was primarily a defensive, reactive, and specific reaction. And though the specificity of the anti-superport mobilization facilitated its success, this had also limited the broader applicability of this approach for dealing with Palau’s deeper environment and development problems. Moreover, a development alternative had not been presented during the controversy, and once the seemingly pressing

<sup>2</sup> “Port Pacific and industrial labor with families and supporting facilities must be imported and established . . . The total population to operate the Palau installation should not exceed 10-12,000” (from a *Superport ngmel Bealu?*:4). Government figures put Palau’s population at the time at 14,511. It was probably lower.

<sup>3</sup> Both in activist literature at the time and by way of other sources, a concern was voiced that Palau not end up like Guam or Hawaii, where the indigenous, original inhabitants had indeed become minorities in their own land.

<sup>4</sup> One of the most dramatic of these was the Iranian Revolution, which cut the amount of their oil that was available for export.

threat of the port faded, so did the relatively strong sense of Palauan vulnerability.

Coming on the heels of the superport controversy, Palauans had to decide whether to remain part of Micronesia,<sup>5</sup> or to chart their own political and economic course. But, since this article is not a political history, Palau's decision to reject a constitution for a proposed Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) will only be briefly discussed.

Palauans chafed at the prospect of having both decision making and Palauan natural and strategically-derived resources controlled and dispensed by unsympathetic outsiders. The above was a major factor that influenced 55 percent of the Palauans voting in a referendum in July of 1978 to reject the FSM constitution. This vote was a watershed in the contemporary history of Palau, since it determined that both the parameters for national identity and political structure would be forged by Palauans.

Nonetheless, the separatist drive had its limitations. As with the anti-superport strategy, here was a primarily defensive and reactive response to an anticipated impingement. Moreover with Palau's embarkation on a separate course, the Islands had given up the potentially greater resource base of a united Micronesia. What economic base could Palauans provide as an alternative? No answer was forthcoming.

Palauans then moved towards constitutional government. As they did so, a preference for leadership that would be responsive and responsible, conditioned their action. Indeed, the document that was produced in April 1979 by Palauan elected representatives to a constitutional convention was protective of Palauan resources and was externally-restrictive. A major objective had been to build in safeguards, mainly through provisions for popular referendums, to impede both domestic abuses of power and any linkages between these and predatory outside forces.

The concern behind such constitutional safeguards had some resonance with the strategy of blocking a superport. In both cases, there was a desire to defend Palau against anticipated impingements and degradations. This same anticipatory response, to a somewhat lesser extent, had fueled Palauan protective/defensive efforts during the intervening unity/separation dispute. In contrast to both former strategies, with the development of a constitution the emphasis noted had now crystallized, and was institutionally-embedded. A dual preference could lead to conflict, however, Both during Palau's Constitutional Convention (ConCon), and as reflected in the draft document, Palauans expressed their desire for greater indigenous control, among other things, so that they could protect their environment. But they also sought to maintain, at least for the foreseeable future, a massive flow of U. S. aid. Would the United States be

<sup>5</sup> Micronesia is a historical/descriptive term that is applied to the many small islands that are located in the central Pacific, north of Melanesia and east towards Hawaii.

willing to provide this, if its underlying military/strategic and more specific “requirements” were impeded by Palauans? Some Palauans began to ask this question.

Another element of constitution-building could also cause difficulties. The national government blueprint for would be large, social service oriented, and likely to be quite expensive. The amount of funds required for this were likely to greatly exceed that which could be generated from Palau. And yet, even if the United States was not already alienated, any aid that it was likely to offer would probably be contingent on a relatively massive, active, and possibly environmentally-degrading, military usage of Palau.

Towards the end of March 1979, just days before Palau’s ConCon was completed, the United States began to communicate its unease over aspects of Palau’s emerging constitution. Among other things, the United States was concerned about the Draft Constitution’s requirement that three-quarters of the voters, in a general referendum, must approve the introduction of nuclear and other “harmful substances” in Palau. The United States also did not want to accept the Draft Constitution’s claim of Palauan jurisdiction over a 200 mile, archipelagic limit. Taken together, the Palauan provisions could establish a sizable “nuclear-free” zone in the Pacific. The United States viewed this possibility with alarm. Another major area of U. S. concern was the constitutional provision restricting the use of eminent domain by the Palauan national government, in a way that could make it difficult for the United States to acquire the land it wanted for military purposes.

Despite the U. S. objections, almost all of Palau’s ConCon delegates signed the Draft Constitution, for a variety of reasons. A faction of Palauans, however, seemed to side with the United States. They urged that Palauans not vote on the Draft Constitution, until revisions were made to satisfy U. S. military/strategic requirements. For its part, the United States went further, indicating that if Palauans went ahead and adopted the Draft Constitution, then the United States might refuse to offer Palau continuing high levels of economic aid. Such aid was anticipated as part of an expected “free association”<sup>6</sup> relationship with the United States.

Palau, at this point, clearly faced a dilemma. It appeared that Palauans either had to undo their constitutional safeguards, which had been embedded to protect themselves and their environment, or the United States might withdraw the option of free association, with its continued economic aid and other forms of assistance.

The indigenous coalition that arose, in large part, to defend the Draft Constitution, was primarily a popular crusade and protest movement, before sweeping into power in 1980. During 1979, the People’s Committee (PC)

<sup>6</sup> In this political and economic arrangement with the United States, Palau could count on continuing aid, but would have to accept constraints on its control of foreign affairs, the Islands’ resources, and would also have to accommodate U. S. military interests.

generated an unprecedented degree of popular participation and support. A major basis for this was the PC's ability to tap into and fan Palauan concerns about anticipated degradations, envisioned from U. S. military and other foreign activities. The apprehension over the military had a strong historical base. This stretches back to Palauans' devastating experience during World War Two. The unease was then fanned by the anti-military tone of some of the PC's rhetoric. Though the PC's ultimate stance was never clarified, some PC supporters and others regarded the coalition as being against large-scale U. S. military presence, particularly if it involved nuclear weapons.

The frightening scenario associated with such a presence was described to the author by an indigenous leader. This informant said, "With nuclear weapons and the coming of other military equipment could come war." Palau could once again become a target, as had been the case during World War Two. According to this view, it was precisely *because* the Japanese had militarized the Islands, that the Americans responded with a devastating retaliatory attack. Therefore, and in contrast with the often-stated U. S. position to the effect that a major U. S. military presence would protect the Islands, at least some Palauans saw the probable result in almost opposite terms. My informant stated: "We have already experienced war and we know that you in your big countries . . . you already know where the important [enemy] weapons are kept. These places then become targets for attack . . . and if this occurs, then the conflict is not only between you and [your] enemy. Nuclear weapons kill everybody and if these things leak or there is an accident, that will be the end of our Islands and us . . ." Indigenous recognition of Palau's vulnerability to the interests and power struggles of infinitely larger countries, the scope and ramifications of the envisioned threat, and of the finite and fragile nature of Palau's resources, would continue.

Support for the PC was also based on a recognition of the need for a constitution that would be protective of Palau's resources, especially land. For instance, some indigenous leaders, as stated by one known to the author, considered land to be at the center "of all the activities that make life for us human beings easier and safe . . ." He also stated that, "if we lose the land, then there will be no place for us Palauans to live." Palauan control of land was seen as embedded in the Draft Constitution, which the PC sought to protect.

The same leader as above also articulated another fear that was politically-significant at the time. It was the concern that some Palauan businessmen might benefit exclusively from selling land to outsiders. Having done this, such businessmen might then "forget all about . . . the rest of us Palauans."

The Draft Constitution was seen as impeding such linkages. The anticipatory fear, that some Palauans would develop strategic connections with powerful outsiders, and then act in an irresponsible and destructive way, lingered from the superport controversy.



The first referendum in Palau on whether to approve a Palauan constitution was held in July of 1979. As part of this campaign to support this Draft Constitution, the PC championed the document as one that could enhance popular control over Palauan resources, and over decision making. Their charge that their Palauan opponents were trying to "sell Palau to the United States," also struck an emotive, responsive chord. Though the constitution was approved with an overwhelming, affirmative vote, through a combination of political and legislative maneuvers, it was initially invalidated.

After moves and counter-moves, both sides in Palau squared off for a crucial vote in October of that year. The PC advised that Palauans' vote "no" on the revised constitutional draft so that the original, more protective, version could be legally revived at a later date.

As during their earlier campaign, the PC maintained that the safeguards embedded in the original constitution could prevent a disruptive and dangerous U. S. military presence from materializing. These concerns were emphasized by graphic portrayals in PC leaflets. In one of these, it is stated that the ". . . campaign [for the revised constitution] is really associated with dangerous weapons that will bring sickness and death." One finishes the leaflet with the sight of the mushroom cloud from a 1947 nuclear test at Bikini Lagoon, in the Marshalls.<sup>7</sup> Palauans of an anti-nuclear persuasion were quite aware of U. S. nuclear activities and missile testing in the Marshalls, including the negative health and mixed social effects on the population there.

In addition to the PC's continuing emphasis on nuclear and other military dangers, they continued to maintain that without the safeguards embedded in the original constitution, Palau's resources would end up "in the hands of a few unscrupulous men." Once again we see the potent theme utilized—that of an unholy and destructive alliance between a Palauan minority and outsiders. Palauans opposing the PC argued that without the revisions the constitution now had, Palauans would not receive vital economic aid. This theme largely fell on deaf ears, however. After all, after the initial heat of the constitutional controversy with the United States, it did not seem that Palauans had to face a painful fight over control or assistance, yet. Moreover, as the PC was finding out, it was both domestically popular and politically expedient to avoid taking a position on Palau's dilemma.

In 1980, PC-affiliated leaders would almost fill Palau's House of Elected Members (HEM).<sup>8</sup> In defending the original constitution from revision, and in driving their Palauan opponents from many positions of political power, the PC

<sup>7</sup> The Marshalls Islands, the easternmost island group in Micronesia and the United States Trust Territory, have been the site of numerous test detonations by the United States of atomic weapons, and are the location of continuing U. S. missile and interception tests.

<sup>8</sup> The House of Elected Members was Palau's body of elected representatives, before the start of constitutional government. At the time, a House of Chiefs (HOC) was also part of Palau's legislature.

had achieved remarkable success. But many questions outlived the PC victories of 1979. For instance, what might happen if the United States proved recalcitrant in its constitutional demands? Would some degree of relative deprivation and austerity be entertained by Palauans, as the cost of constitutional integrity and protecting the environment, if the choice came to this?

As part of their campaign to domestically ratify the revived, original constitution, the PC/House of Elected Members continued to champion an anti-nuclear and pro-self-determined stance. Palauan rhetoric to this end continued to spring from both substantive commitment and from a manipulative intent.

The day before the referendum, in July 1980, foreigners of an anti-nuclear persuasion were clearly in evidence, interacting with like-minded Palauans. Also on that day a Palauan who was prominent in anti-nuclear activities, fully explained her views to me.

A major factor that contributed to the anti-nuclear sentiments held by some Palauans was an anticipatory/comparative perspective. By this is meant an anticipatory response to an envisioned scenario, the latter assuming shape through a comparison of the expected developments to processes which had already occurred, in other lands. Palauan abilities in this regard are based on indigenous eclectic tendencies, as well as on the many opportunities for education, travel, and other forms of cosmopolitan exposure, that have been available to Palauans as part of the Trust Territory regime.

As one of Palau's more western-educated and internationally-exposed Palauans, it was clear that the experiences of my informant stretched far beyond the Islands. As one example, she reported that, during one of her visits to the U. S. mainland, she visited a U. S. naval base where she obtained information on Trident nuclear submarines.<sup>9</sup> She remarked on how many cities the missiles from a Trident could destroy and said that in California, "they are building a freeway" just to move Tridents to the sea. She also said she had heard that Tridents were as big as three football fields, and asked me how big that was, exactly? Though her information may not have been accurate, it is clear that this Palauan was impressed by, and was fearful of, the immense size and destructive capacities of such a weapon. Note how, in some respects, the awe and unease inspired by the scale, technological complexity, and myriad possible impacts of such a prospect was similar to the threat that had been posed by the envisioned superport project.

It is difficult to know, however, the number of Palauans who shared a strong commitment to such views. In part, this was because some of the Palauans continued to fashion their rhetoric, primarily to suit the taste of an international

<sup>9</sup> Since the mid 1970s, there have been persistent stories, including a number of articles in the press, about a United States intention to establish a base for Trident nuclear submarines in Palau.

audience, so as to elicit sympathy. Clearly, the pro-self-determination and anti-nuclear statements made by the PC/HEM were designed in part so as to attract the interest and sympathy of foreign audiences. And indeed, the message, projected to the wider Pacific and even Pacific rim, did enlist considerable interest and at least moral support. But what did the message mean to most Palauans at the time? One Palauan expressed a revealing view that was also held by some others. He reported that the international rhetoric was simply a means “. . . to get the constitution passed. You taught us how to play politics, and now we play it to you.” In other words, this Palauan and some others recognized that the anti-colonial, anti-nuclear rhetoric that was being projected was done partly as a manipulative strategy.

International anti-nuclear and anti-colonialist sympathies, as well as those of a more strictly environmental variety, were now targets for such Palauan appeals.

Domestically, the idea that Palau could adopt its “anti-nuclear” constitution and at the same time move towards free association on Palauan terms, appeared as the most popular, or at least as the most reassuring position. And, in fact, after the original constitution was again overwhelmingly approved by Palauan voters, the United States appeared to offer glimmers of hope, or at least of ambiguity. In other words, the U. S. posture around July of 1980 seemed to validate the view held by the PC/HEM, and some others; to the effect that Palauans might put off a painful decision over unpalatable options until conditions improved. To re-state, these environment-development options were:

1. envisioned control over, and protection of, Palauan resources through a constitution; but, Palauan adherence to this document might alienate the United States to the point where American aid would be withdrawn or reduced thus leaving Palau economically deprived; or
2. constitutional and other accommodations that on the one hand might enable free association and continuing high levels of aid from the United States; but, on the other hand, in addition to being politically and symbolically frustrating, option 2 might also involve a Palauan dismantling of environmental and other safeguards thus leaving the Islands open for very disruptive and probably degrading use by the U. S. military and other external forces.

Given such a painful choice it is no wonder that the PC/HEM sought to avoid taking a decisive stance on such a potentially decisive issue. This also meant, though, that as the PC/HEM broke up, Palau’s fundamental dilemma had not been attacked.

The next event that occupied Palauans was their first presidential campaign. This campaign illustrates the complex interaction between objective and vulnerabilities, environmental threats, how both are subjectively experienced, and the role played by leadership. The campaign, to fill many posts in the Palauan republic, was conducted between September and November of 1980.

During the campaign, considerable indigenous unease continued to be exhibited over Palau's vulnerability to disruptions and degradations from outside forces. The possible use and abuse of Palau by the U. S. military was a source of anxiety. This was expressed by villagers and others. There was also an indigenous recognition of the distortions that were associated with Palau's high level of economic dependence on the United States.

Despite such awareness, a number of political and socio-economic factors deflected potentially explosive topics such as U. S. military use and anticipated degradations from the path of instructive controversy. The candidate who had the greatest domestic strength, Haruo Remeliik, maintained that Palauans need not be overly concerned about the possibility of environmental, economic, and political damage arising from a political status agreement. Remeliik stated that if elected he would do no more than to execute the peoples' will. He also stated that the arrangements for this would take much time and that in the interim nothing adverse could occur since the United States was bound by present agreements. He also suggested that any Palauan leaders who attempted to escalate political status-related concerns were "playing politics" for short-range, opportunistic reasons. This latter development would be unfortunate, as it could only complicate the public's reaching of an enlightened consensus. Hereafter, these Remeliik positions are referred to as his "not to worry" stance.

Indeed, at least one candidate tried to tap into and exploit Palauan concerns about a possible loss of land to U. S. military activities. The attempt failed, however. This was largely due to political factors. The candidate in question, who we shall refer to as candidate C, put out leaflets that graphically illustrated his points. One of these contained the following message: "This [map] is the outline . . . of the land of Palau that will be lost if we agree to free association, as this has been formulated to date. The people who are responsible are Salii, Tmetchul, and Remeliik and the American Rosenblatt.<sup>10</sup> Their agreement for free association will destroy the land . . . [and it] contradicts our constitution."

C's focus on Palauan land and U. S. military interests might have struck a responsive chord, if not for major weaknesses in his campaign. As of late 1980, candidate C had a serious political reputation problem. Moreover, his sharp and overt attacks against other candidates also detracted from his campaign.

In addition to political strengths and weaknesses, and the capacity of Remeliik's stance to reassure a worried populace, there were a number of more general factors that mitigated against the concern discussed from becoming a focus of the campaign. There was a desire among most candidates, and among the population, to avoid directly confronting a painful and seemingly intractable coupling of options. Furthermore, none of the candidates could present a

<sup>10</sup> Salii, Tmetchul, and Remeliik were Palauans running against candidate C in the presidential campaign. Rosenblatt was a controversial American negotiator. Overt attacks against the other candidates were viewed as inappropriate, as was the regionally chauvinist flavor of his campaign.

concrete, comprehensive, socially acceptable, and arguably feasible alternative to either the status quo, or to some accommodation of the U. S. military to obtain free association at some point in the future.

Nonetheless, all the candidates expressed strong reservations about any U. S. nuclear presence. Even the candidate who many viewed as “pro-American” remarked that the nuclear question “weighted heavily” on his mind, though he did feel that Palauans could ensure that adequate safety measures would be taken. A more skeptical view was taken by candidate Roman Tmetchul, and Tmetchul’s remarks provide a final example to illustrate the variety of experiences that feed into an anti-nuclear position. “If I had the power to do so, I would wipe out all forms of nuclear power in the world. My experience in the last war [World War Two] plus the results of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Three Mile incident [in the United States], plus the testing of nuclear bombs in the Pacific . . . substantiates my opinion . . .,” Tmetchul said.<sup>11</sup> As was the case with the activists, Tmetchul’s concern with the nuclear question cast a broad net, capturing incidents separated by great distances and decades.

More specifically, Tmetchul stated that “there is a provision against nuclear [materials] in our constitution. If there is any indication by the people that this law [should] be modified, it has to be done according to our constitution, which calls for a referendum” to pass by a three-quarters vote. At the time, the other candidates seemed to share his view.

So far in our discussion we have dealt with deliberate attempts by leadership to heighten, maintain, or to deflect Palauans’ concerns about anticipated degradations. However, there was another factor that strongly influenced the presidential race, a factor that was not emphasized by most of the candidates: it was the factor of loyalty. Loyalty was an informal, largely implicit standard meant to ensure that Palau’s first president would advance the overall interests and welfare of the Islands. One villager, during a Remeliik trip to rural Palau, commented on loyalty with a particularly vivid remark: “Whoever is elected president, I ask that he will not betray Palau. Palau is our beautiful Island and we do not want to see it wasted. Whatever your relationship is with the United States, that is fine . . . . But do not destroy Palau.”

In addition to the desire to insure popular control over Palau’s national leaders, who were faced with external pressures and inducements, the emphasis on loyalty was also due to the desire for broad-based input into, and indigenous control over, the development process.

The two concerns addressed by loyalty were related. Many Palauans seemed to assume that a consensual, public, and Palau-oriented leader was more likely to be associated with enhanced indigenous control over the development process. This expectations worked to the benefit of the Remeliik candidacy.

<sup>11</sup> Remarks made by presidential candidate Roman Tmetchul during debate by all the candidates for president, aired on Palau’s television station (WALU TV) in October 1980.

In contrast, Tmetchul's behavior and positions, and also those of candidate Lazarus Salii, aroused some suspicion. A perception, which had first come to prominence during the superport controversy, still lingered and was particularly associated with Tmetchul. Some felt that his approach to government was relatively undemocratic, and if coupled with the rapid, massive, and foreign-oriented development path that he seemed to prefer, could badly disrupt and even degrade the Islands. Salii, for his part, was viewed by some as identifying with a non-Palauan way of life, and as possibly sympathetic to American political, and even military interests.

When the votes were counted, Haruo Remeliik won the presidency. Remeliik had persuasively argued that a Palauan government should "have no favorites," and should be accessible to, and responsive of, the broad range of Palauans. It should also protect Palauans from disruptions and abuse from foreign-oriented, inappropriate, development schemes.

The process and outcome of the election included both areas of closure and of continuing uncertainty. For one thing, Palau now had a president-elect. Moreover, Remeliik had articulated preference for a development scheme, one that would be public, subject to broad-based input and indigenous control, move at a moderate pace, and not be too environmentally disruptive.

But on the other side of the coin, another development mode had been presented and had received considerable support. As noted, Salii and Tmetchul seemed to prefer a more rapid, foreign-oriented, probably disruptive, and possibly degrading development mode. Nonetheless, this path might still emerge as dominant, particularly if apprehension over anticipated impacts were to lessen, and if a more moderate mode came to be seen as ineffective.

Somewhat ironically, the greatest area of closure was the continuing desire to avoid making a painful and binding decision on Palau's choices. Within Palau, in the context of the national election campaign, Remeliik's "not to worry" position had emerged as reasonably persuasive. Moreover, by the end of the campaign, Palauans had clearly expressed an interest in retaining by their own preferences. They wanted to maintain high levels of American economic support, retention of constitutional integrity, with its environmental safeguards, and embarkation on a Palauan oriented and controlled development mode that would be participatory, benefit all Palauans, and not be too environmentally-disruptive.

With the start of Palau's constitutional government, as 1981 began, the emerging nation's expressive and organizational parameters began to take shape. Inauguration celebrations, ceremonies, and rhetoric pictured Palau in a confident and assertive light. The realities of continued dependence and vulnerability were de-emphasized.

A few months into the operation of the national government, President Remeliik began to flesh out goals that the nation might achieve. He admitted that the "most difficult part" would be to balance self-reliance as a means to

promote Palauan control with the Islands' present and desired high standard of living. Remeliik still did not dwell, however, on how Palauan reliance on even a lessened and controlled amount of aid from the United States might limit Palauan political control and expose the Islands to environmentally-destructive foreign schemes.

Certainly Remeliik and some other Palauans expressed a hope that they could find a way to avoid having to embrace extreme and repulsive options, such as total military and even nuclear accommodation or reckless and uncontrolled economic development with immediate dangers to Palau's environment.

Perhaps such scenarios could be avoided, and Palau could enter the contemporary world at least partially on indigenous terms, through a "middle course" for Palauan-oriented and controlled development. Remeliik publicly articulated this path in April of 1981.

Remeliik suggested that a strong contribution from Palau's subsistence-oriented village economy, increased market competition, and a controlled use of American and perhaps other foreign aid could create a foundation for Palau's emergence as a sovereign nation. He admitted that such a middle course would require time, patience, delicate balancing, and some sacrifice for the longer run. Of course, as of April, the path was nothing more than rhetoric. Nor, even at this level, did it fully address the question of U. S. military use.

Remeliik's middle course encountered challenges, almost immediately. The first was a short-lived but intense controversy over political status arrangements, and the negative impacts on Palauans and their environment, that were expected from this. The flare-up was sparked by President-elect Remeliik's initialing, as head of the Palau Commission on Status and Transition (PCST), of elements of a free association agreement with the United States on November 17, 1980.

Within Palau, before and beyond the time of the initialing, there were indications of a largely parallel course being pursued by at least two of Remeliik's political rivals. They wanted to use developments relating to status and U. S. military use, and the extensive public unease that was already in place on these questions, as a tool to destabilize the Remeliik Presidency. More generally, though, and as revealed by public hearings (see below), many Palauans were truly worried that perhaps Remeliik had taken a unilateral, disadvantageous, and binding step by initialing the status agreements, and that major degradations might soon follow.

During the public hearings held on the initialing, national elected leaders, appointed ones, traditional chiefs, and other interested parties, were all present. In general, it was felt by those opposing the agreements that Palau was "giving away too much" and had gotten too little. Palauan concerns, however, did not simply involve the level of U. S. funding. There was also a deep concern that activities stemming from the agreements could badly degrade Palauans and their environment. Such fears, as we have seen, have been of long-standing in Palau.

The unease expressed during the hearings was particularly acute for the areas where the United States would have “exclusive” use for its military. For example, one leader from one such village, stated the following: “In \_\_\_\_\_ they want to test bombs. We do not know what kind [of bombs they will test]. But at present, if they test them, then all of Palau could be destroyed.” Uncertainty over the specifics fueled the apprehension, as did the continuing recognition on the part of Palauans of the vulnerability of Palau’s finite and fragile resource base.

Questioning centered on whether Palau, and which Palauans, would have the option to accept to reject specific U. S. military usages and operations on particular lands. Remeliik, much of the PCST, and supporters in Palau’s legislature, took the position that specific arrangements could be worked out between the national government and the Palauans in question. More generally, they sought to assure Palauans that any military impacts would be minor and, in any case, would be strictly under Palauan control. Note how this attempt to deflect a concern was similar to the position which had prevailed during the national election campaign (as discussed previously). Since then, however, political status and related matters had become an exploitable issue.

Nonetheless, this specific flare-up over political status quickly subsided. Though the long-range threat remained undiminished, once again, a number of political and socio-economic factors acted to diffuse any immediate sense of urgency about anticipated environmental and other threats. First, and as during the national election campaign, some viewed the attacks that were primarily aimed against Remeliik but also against other members of the PCST as springing from short-term and politically opportunistic motives. In other words, those most vocal in the questioning were viewed with distrust. Second, Remeliik’s continuing domestic strengths facilitated popular acceptance of his “not to worry” position. Third, and as had been the case during the national election campaign, no Palauan leader could convincingly present an alternative to the above mentioned position that was socially acceptable and likely to work. The best option, then, was Remeliik’s seemingly neutral position: he continued to say that approval of any agreements was ultimately up to the Palauan voters, and that as their servant he would only execute their will. Fifth, as 1981 began, more immediate and intriguing avenues were opened for Palauan political competition and maneuver. Sixth, it had become clear by the end of the controversy that Palau still had room for maneuver *vis-a-vis* the United States.

Remeliik, and by implication Palau’s National Executive, had faced an initial challenge. His popularity may have suffered somewhat and for the first time his loyalty had been questioned. Furthermore, the persuasive ability of his “not to worry” stance may have been weakened somewhat. And though, at least for the short-run, Palau’s environment/development dilemma had been avoided again, the concern surrounding it might at any time reemerge as a controversy. This



was politically likely if Palauan room for maneuver once more appeared as constricted and if negative impacts were once again seen as looming near.

Remeliik's response to the status flare-up and to other challenges, probably reinforced a minor but politically important perception that Remeliik's moderate leadership style, and the "middle path" that he advocated for development, might not be highly relevant or effective. Furthermore, and as noted, there was another development mode waiting in the wings (as discussed previously).

Clearly, there were uncertainties that outlived Remeliik's articulation of an emergent position. Pursuit of a moderate style and development mode might bring little of the desired change. As reported by an adviser/consultant to the new government, the idea was to gradually move Palauans away from dependency and towards self-reliance. But, if the pace was lenient and gradual the result might be a deepening and broadening of the very dependence and vulnerability that the new government sought to reduce. After all, the Palauans had the option of continuing the seductive, albeit vulnerable, development path that was being supported by U. S. aid.

There was also concern in some quarters that Palau's cultural well-being might be degraded, in a form some envisioned as a gradual but cumulative "Americanization" of Palau. Under extent conditions and arrangements, continuing external subsidy from the United States might well support the maintenance of high levels of consumption of imported, nonessential items by a growing segment of the Palauan population. The above development might contribute to the gradual replacement of a distinctively Palauan society, one that was meaningfully and functionally woven into a relatively pristine natural environment by externally oriented culture that was dependent on, and only able to exist through, massive transfusions of U. S. aid.

Of all the questions in 1981, the most profound involved the issue of political status and Palau's underlying, environment/development dilemma. At the point that the author left the field, it seemed highly unlikely that the transit of nuclear materials and weapons as provided for in subsidiary agreements being negotiated between Palau and the United States, could receive the 75 percent or greater approval in a referendum. Such approval was required by the Palauan constitution's "harmful substances" ban.

If, at long last, a choice had to be made between constitutional adherence and foreign aid, the predicament would be painful indeed. However, and short of this, various factors conspired to maintain the status quo. Moreover, Palauans came to believe that they could prolong this option through an interaction mode of continual maneuver [5].

Without resolution of the status question, moreover, divisive conflict could periodically deflect and consume Palauan talent, energy, and other resources, as the slim chances for comprehensive control and environmental protection

continued to slip away. The longer that such a divisive and unstable status quo is maintained, the more likely that Palauan self-reliance and other goals would become progressively eroded, thus leaving Palau in a weakened and more vulnerable state. Furthermore, as this occurs, the pressing need to obtain transfusions of aid might drive Palauans to the brink of accommodating environmentally-destructive interests.

## REVIEW/CONCLUSION

Before a statement of principles learned, a brief review of Palauan strategies is in order. The effort to oppose the superport had overcome formidable challenges. After all, the threat was exotic, promised benefits for some, and the dangers could only be anticipated. Nonetheless, the project was derailed, in large part due to the impressive communicative/mobilization carried out by the SPO, coupled with their sophisticated, external appeals. Furthermore, by the end of the controversy, some reactive clarification had taken place. Development, henceforth, should be public, participatory, should primarily benefit most Palauans, and not destroy the environment. The anti-superport strategy also had serious weaknesses, however. It was reactive, oppositional, and quite specific. Such qualities do not persist in the face of inconstant threats.

The strategy of separating Palau from the rest of Micronesia faced moderate challenges. The separatists' strengths and weaknesses were similar to those of the anti-superport campaign, though with separation a Palauan oppositional stance had been carried to a broader front. Neither strategy, however, provided Palau with an economic base.

Palauans' move to constitution-building signified a more assertive, protective, and potentially long-range approach, that was meant to defend Palauans and their resources. But the continuing absence of an economically productive approach, coupled with Palauans' conflicting desires for both high levels of support and for control, had an unintended consequence of moving Palau closer to its underlying dilemma. With the voicing by the United States of its objections, Palau's constitutional integrity, with its environmentally protective provisions, was now pitted against the possible withdrawal of U. S. "aid."

The PC's attempt to defend Palau's Draft Constitution, as with previous strategies, had an internal and external component. The internal effort fanned widely held and historically grounded concerns about a loss of Palauan control and the destruction of the environment. Once again, an internal campaign was coupled with effective, external appeals. On both fronts, the ability of Palauans to entertain and project apprehension about envisioned, extremely complicated, and potentially destructive developments, was facilitated by a comparative/anticipatory perspective. Of course, the PC also had to have the tactical and pragmatic sense necessary to outmaneuver its domestic opponents. However,

one strength of the PC, in the longer run, could prove a weakness. The PC had found it both expedient and popular to avoid confronting Palau's environmental/development dilemma, which now remained for another day.

In some contrast with earlier events, the national election campaign was more of a forum or arena. It was highly revealing, nonetheless. Treatment of it illuminated the complex interaction between objective conditions, related environmental threats, how both are subjectively experienced, and the role played by leadership. As noted, there was a remarkable degree of indigenous recognition of the complex and future-oriented threats that stalked Palau. Nonetheless, a number of political and socio-economic factors, both local in origin and resonating with broader, external conditions, deflected the Palauan unease.

Treatment of the election campaign also illustrates the gap between short- and long-term considerations. Remeliik's "not to worry" position facilitated an immediate objective—his election. But it also meant that Palau's underlying problems would remain in place. In fact, the preference was to retain options for both control/protection and for support. However, given the centrality of the conflicts involved, this non-resolution of Palau's dilemma could destabilize Palauan political control and any ability to defend the environment, in the longer run.

In a number of respects, Remeliik's articulation of a "middle path" was an important advance over earlier events. After all, now there was some recognition of the need for an economic base and of the difficulties in avoiding the unpalatable development options that haunted Palau. Nonetheless, the middle path did not provide Palau with a socially acceptable and technically feasible means to wean Islanders from their extreme dependency, and thereby to lessen Palau's vulnerability to worrisome, external interests.

Moreover, the middle course was almost immediately stressed. The flare-up over status provided us with another case of how political and socio-economic factors can heavily influence the public's arousal over complex threats. In this instance such factors had a powerful, diffusing effect, though the underlying problem remained.

The article then discussed the uncertainties that outlived Remeliik's articulation of an emergent path. The specifics of this need not detain us here. Suffice to say that even an interaction mode that seeks to avoid confrontation, and which succeeds in doing so at least for a time, can have drawbacks as well as blessings. The calculation of range and benefits has presented Palau with a very complicated dilemma. In the next and final article, the author will show how the intractable nature of Palau's dilemma has intriguing parallels with, and can shed much light on, the nuclear and environmental problems that threaten us all.

For the present, we have seen how political and socio-economic factors can affect the public's perception of environmental threats. In addition, political

leaders can either increase or lessen both the level and duration of the public's actions to defend the environment. For such a defense to last, however, the strategies that are devised must be capable of dealing with the variety of societal conditions, including the economic ones. Palauans' efforts to defend the environment were remarkably sophisticated politically. But these efforts remain vulnerable due to Palauans' avoidance of establishing an economic base.

## UPDATE

Since the author left Palau in 1981, faction-fighting, external appeals, and Palau's underlying dilemma have continued—unprecedented violence has further complicated this picture. In late 1981 and early 1982, government workers went on strike. Their actions were led by President Remeliik's primary rival. The major demand was to raise wages. Palau's executive government balked, arguing that any such allocation of funds could only push Palau deeper into dependency. Considerable violence accompanied the labor unrest. Violence, in fact, reached unheard of proportions, with the assassination of President Remeliik in 1985.

Less unprecedented has been Palauans' continual maneuvering. Much of it has revolved around the knot of constitutional integrity, political status, and the environmental and other damages that are expected from U. S. military activities. A number of referendums occurred, and Palauans continued to give a mixed message. With each vote at least a majority approved of free association. However, in none did the Palauans give the 75 percent or more approval that was deemed necessary to override their constitution's ban on nuclear and other "harmful substances." Clearly, Palauans wanted free association, but on their terms—a lot of aid but not massive military use, and certainly not nuclear weapons. In the fifth referendum since 1983, the Palauan vote once again fell short of 75 percent. This was during the vote in June of 1987. Palauans' freedom of maneuver was now to be disrupted, however.

Just after the June 30th vote, President Lazarus Salii, who has consistently urged that his countrymen permanently associate themselves with the United States, furloughed most of the workers that make up Palau's government economy. The furloughed workers apparently blamed pro-constitution forces for Palau's economic plight, and threatened violence. In a flurry of activity that August, most Palauans moved to dismantle their constitution's externally restrictive safeguards so as to make way for free association. The means that they employed, however, may still be subject to legal, and perhaps to political, challenge. One factor that has discouraged legal appeals by pro-constitution forces has been the violence directed at a number of their members in Palau. Stark violence, which had burst on the scene with Remeliik's assassination two years earlier, now interacted with government measures of economic austerity and/or retribution so as to shrink Palauans' room for further maneuver.

### REFERENCES

1. J. Epstein, Indigenous Attempts to Protect the Environment: A Pacific Island Case, *Journal of Environmental Systems*, 17:2, pp. 131-148, 1987-88.
2. R. Panero, A Proposal for the Development of an International Transshipment and Petroleum Storage Port for the District of Palau, Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, prepared and submitted for consultation to the Imperial Government of Iran by Robert Panero Associates, Inc., Port Pacific Development Corporation, p. 15, June 11, 1976.
3. H. F. Olson, An Assessment of the Port Pacific Proposal, unpublished paper, University of Hawaii Pacific Collection, p. 51, May 1978.
4. M. Herz (compiler), Palau and the Superport: The Development of an Ocean Ethic, Publication No. 1 of the Ocean Research and Policy Institute of the Oceanic Society, An Oceanic Society Symposium at San Francisco State University (June 13), as part of the 58th annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, San Francisco, CA, p. 17, 1977.
5. J. Epstein, Dependency and Affluence as Challenges to National Development in Palau, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hawaii, pp. 451-452, May 1986.

Direct reprint requests to:

Joshua Epstein, Ph.D.  
P. O. Box 99  
Stony Brook, New York 11790