

## TAKING THE LONG VIEW

Not too long ago a gentleman visited these islands offering a new eight million dollar college as a gift to the Micronesian people from the U.S. Congress. His offer met with an enthusiastic response almost everywhere. At last Micronesia would soon have its own four-year college! Not a conventional college, but one that would be specially tailored for providing training in vocational skills or whatever else is judged educationally relevant.

I was dismayed by the uncritical enthusiasm that greeted the visitor's offer, well-intentioned though it was. Don't people here know, I asked myself, that the new college will cost almost two million dollars a year to operate? A tidy sum, considering that the total amount of local revenues generated in the TT is only seven million dollars at present. Isn't this gesture, I thought, a bit like making a gift to a poor friend of a good-sized German Shepherd to guard his house, letting him know as you walk out the door that the animal eats five pounds of meat a day?

In any case, would a new four-year college of any kind help solve the burning question of how to promote economic development? Diplomas abound in the Trust Territory and marketable skills are on the increase. The real problem, of course, is jobs; and this won't be solved by adding another expensive educational mill. As long as the goal is to develop Micronesia's resources and make the islands more productive, a new college with an increased capacity can only make a bad situation worse. If you want a person to spend his life in a fishing boat or on a farm, the worst thing you can do is plant him in a chair for another four years. He will very likely never get out of it afterwards.

It's the old story, I said to myself. Another "gift" from abroad. . .more hidden costs, social and economic. . .and the dependency rut gets deeper and deeper.

How is it, I wondered, that this familiar story is repeated over and over again, even by individuals and groups that profess a commitment to self-reliance? Surely some of them must see the long-range effects of these projects.

Consider the response to the Headstart and Old Age Programs, to use as examples two federal programs designed to benefit opposite ends of the population.

No sooner was the Trust Territory made eligible for federal funds under these titles than every district opened an office, applied for government money, and began an earnest search for ways to spend it. The immediate benefits of the two federal programs were all too obvious—food for the young and the old, an income for those on the payroll, travel abroad for program directors and their understudies, and the promise of other good things to come.

But how about the fact that the palates of the young were being habituated to breakfasts of tomato juice and doughnuts? What about the danger of families abdicating their strongly-felt traditional responsibility to provide for the elderly? Or the risk of weakening family and community ties, as still another responsibility of theirs is surrendered to a government agency? Then, of course, there is again the matter of furthering the economic dependence of Micronesia on a global Superpower that has military interests to maintain.

Somehow these last questions were overlooked in the rush to expand the district payroll and get money rolling in. A paycheck and cases of corned beef are just a bit more real than such intangibles as family bonds and psychological dependence.

Do I sound a trifle "anti-progress," or possibly even cynical? Then let me make a public confession. Neither I nor the staff of the small private school of which I am Director have altogether resisted the temptations of "easy money" from abroad. We are receiving federal funds from the six-million dollar Federal Feeding Program, as are virtually all public schools and a good many mission schools as well.

To understand how an abomination of this sort might have happened, you would have to put yourself in the zories of a school administrator who is wondering how he will make it to the end of May without going broke. Local support groups have not come through, the school accounts are just about exhausted, and bills continue to pile higher on his desk. Just then, in walks a federal program officer with a sheaf of papers in hand who proudly announces that he has the funds to cover the entire cost of the school feeding program for the year. To the beleaguered school administrator it is a heaven-sent answer to a pressing problem. Naturally he signs on the dotted line, heaves a sigh of relief, and settles back to wait for the first check to come.

That, however, is only the beginning. A year later the administrator has to decide whether he shall continue to participate in the Feeding Program. He knows very well that the 25 thousand dollars he receives will not raise the nutritional quality of the food one bit. Healthy food is something that teenaged boarding students must have in ample quantity, no matter how financially hard-pressed the school may be. He knows that the Feeding Program of which his school is a beneficiary can only further reinforce the "handout" mentality of a people long accustomed to looking to Washington to pay all their bills. He recalls with a shudder all that he has read and heard about the stifling welfarism of Indian reservations. But he calculates that an additional 25 thousand dollars a year would allow him to build a garage, a maintenance shop and new water tanks which he thinks that the school may need. And so, dismissing the uncomfortable concern he feels for remote consequences, he signs on the dotted line as he did the year before.

Like the others in the examples cited earlier, he has responded to the immediate need and left the future to take care of itself.

Micronesia teems with persons like him (or should I say me?) whose decisions are based on answering today's needs at the expense of the future. Jobs, schools, roads and the like occupy our exclusive attention while the hidden costs of these "improvements" and the nature of the funds that finance them go uncalculated. This preoccupation with the short-term rewards might be called the national disease of Micronesia and it had infected every part of society. The employee who drinks up his paycheck on Friday and Saturday to the sorrow of his family for the following two weeks shows acute symptoms of it. So does the fish dynamiter who pulls in his haul, rubs his belly, and leaves the shattered reef to repair itself—in 20 years' time. Then there is the young college student who spends the two days before his semestral exams emptying Budweiser cans with his friends, and a week hence is looking for plane fare home from college. Is it simply an accident that a couple of years ago the theme song of the islands seemed to be "Help Me Make It Through the Night?"

The people of an island press for Congress of Micronesia funds to erect a seawall, conscious only of the money that will make its way into their pockets, but unmindful of the damage to their sense of community that loss of locally sponsored

labor projects will inflict. Congressmen vote to approve high-cost capital improvement projects to be funded by the U.S., knowing full well that the cost of maintaining these facilities will be a financial burden to Micronesia in later years. Top-level policy-makers campaign for higher wages for government employees, thereby undercutting any real hope of inducing young people to take up less lucrative but much-needed work in commercial agriculture and fishing. And everyone—parents and educators alike—encourages the greatest possible number of high school graduates to go off to college without the least idea of how they will occupy themselves when they return.

Entrepreneurs with an eye for a fast dollar build supermarkets, bars and moviehouses, thus helping to send the annual level of imports soaring still higher. Prominent businessmen who are instrumental in bringing television into their island make a killing on sales of TV sets, leaving the social consequences and the economic effects on families for others to handle.

Political decisions, I fear, are made in much the same way. Nothing can convince me that the people of the Marianas, when they signed their Covenant with the U.S. two years ago, were as fond of the American Eagle as the dollar on which it appears. Yet money buys good things, as I have already ungrudgingly admitted. Whether, however, it will also purchase an enduring social bliss for the Northern Marianas remains to be seen. I have never heard or read a cogent explanation of what any of the separatist districts wants politically and have despaired of ever doing so, although it is well-known what those districts expect by way of fiscal gains. I can only assume that they desire for themselves whatever their generous benefactors desire for them—whether these benefactors be America, Japan, Nauru, or the Sheikdom of Aden. Surely it would be difficult to maintain that their decisions are models of political far-sightedness, whatever else they may have to recommend them.

But the rest of us are in no position to smugly point an accusing finger at those districts that have sought greener pastures—or, to be more exact, greener bankrolls—elsewhere. Which of the remaining districts can honestly say that it would not have jumped at the chance to do likewise, had the opportunity been offered?

We all seem to have fallen prey to this obsession with the immediate pay-off. It may be that this is an all too human weakness, but it is a frightening irony

that our failings should be rationalized in the name of "progress" or "development." If development implies anything at all, it suggests a forward-looking approach—one that is as concerned with tomorrow and 20 years hence as with today.

With the coming of foreign currency to these islands a century and a half ago, Micronesians were for the first time able to accumulate a surplus, to hoard, to save and invest. Money created the possibility of a "tomorrow" in these islands. By a strange irony, however, foreign money is now being used to freeze us securely into the present and to anaesthetize us against a concern for the future.

Not that money, jobs, education, material improvements, and even federal programs are evil in themselves. The real problem is that these and other short-range benefits are so alluring that they overpower more distant considerations. And when they are offered to any of us gratis, their attraction is practically irresistible. An announcement is made that some new federal program is offering funds to establish national parks, buy library books, or develop curricular materials for teaching the metric system. We run to our desks and concoct a proposal that will enable us to receive our share of the funds. Why not take advantage of a windfall while it lasts, we reason!

The trouble is that the objectives we set down for our programs can all too easily be inconsistent with, or even run counter to, broader developmental goals in the Trust Territory.

There's certainly no harm in securing federal money to build a museum in which traditional artifacts will be displayed. . .or in providing emergency assistance for rebuilding houses after a typhoon. . .or in putting up a new sports center at U.S. expense. But we must not be surprised if the cumulative effect of all this on the community is to teach people that Santa Claus comes to Micronesia every day of the year. Over many a desk in Headquarters is posted the inspiring adage: "Give a person a fish and he has a meal today. Teach him how to fish and he has food for the rest of his life." It is very easy to understand how this lesson can be lost on our people today in the face of the mammoth give-away program that enervates our communities even as it showers on them its material "blessings."

Buying canned federal programs is a lot like buying canned fish. It is inexpensive, convenient and satisfying—an eminently sensible thing to do. But there are still those hidden costs to be reckoned with, as we know only too well.

Whether we weigh these costs in making any initial decision or not, they are bound to catch up with us in the end.

Those of us who take a dim view of canned programs funded from abroad—and I include myself here—do so on the grounds that their long-term costs usually outweigh their immediate benefits. These "costs" can be conveniently grouped under three broad headings: social, economic and political, although some would want to add "environmental" as a fourth heading. Let me now suggest a few examples of each.

Regarding social costs we may say this. Programs that introduce into a community a substantial amount of money to build a road, erect a community center or feed school children all too often bring about the psychological or social impoverishment of the community that they are intended to help. This happens when members of the community decide that it is more profitable for them to sit and wait for things to happen rather than to initiate development projects of their own. At this point, cooperative work by families on community projects sharply declines, and so does what we commonly call "community spirit." When most of its responsibilities are pre-empted by government agencies and alien institutions, the community simply loses confidence in its own effectiveness to achieve anything of real value. The same may be said of the family. As it relinquishes its responsibility for feeding toddlers, schoolchildren and the aged, the ties among its members will almost certainly weaken. The obvious question that must be asked of every development project, then, no matter what the source of funding, is whether its effect will be to increase or diminish the social fabric and sense of purpose of the community.

Micronesians commonly refer to their islands as "poor"—that is, as lacking adequate income to provide for themselves much of what they regard as desirable. For this reason, there is usually a mad rush to obtain whatever material benefits the U.S. or any other country might offer by way of assistance. What is often overlooked, however, is that certain gifts may make us poorer rather than richer. Expensive hospitals, water system and airports are also expensive to maintain year by year—and the future budget of a "poor" group of islands is bound to be very limited.

Moreover, some improvements can require an expanding network of expensive facilities and social services to support them (or clean up the social mess

they have made). Take the case of a costly new high school that is built of sufficient size to allow all school-age youth in the area to enroll. Soon after the new school opens discipline problems multiply, since there are clearly a large number of misfits who have been accepted in the campaign to make secondary education universal. To keep the poorer students in school, a special program for potential dropouts is funded through a federal grant. A recreation center is built and new staff is hired on to moderate the center's activities. Social therapists are trained—at additional expense—and hired to counsel "hardcore" problem students. Mental health facilities and referral centers are established through still another program. In short, everything possible is done, at prodigious expense, to keep in school young people who never wanted to be there in the first place.

As social services and physical facilities proliferate along with the programs that support them, Micronesians are gradually led to believe that a society without expensive gadgetry and quackery is entirely impossible. To have a school without sliding classroom dividers or a hospital without sophisticated laboratory equipment becomes unthinkable. It is no wonder that Micronesians have come to believe that they can't live without an extravagant subsidy from abroad! Naturally this means that they will have no recourse but to continue living in the shadow of the American eagle—with all that this implies politically and militarily.

Very few decisions today are simple decisions. Most have far-reaching implications on the future social, economic and political order in these islands.

We know this only too well, of course, but all of us still must adjust to making decisions at times as if there were no tomorrow. Until all of us learn to honestly and openly weigh the long-term effects of our choices, not just count the immediate gains, we will be deluding ourselves by using the catchword "progress" to describe our decisions. Real progress implies taking the long view of life!