

# **The America That Americans Forget**

As tensions with China mount, the U.S. military continues to build up Guam and other Pacific territories — placing the burdens of imperial power on the nation's most ignored and underrepresented citizens.

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Roy Gamboa, a member of Guam's native CHamoru people and a Marine veteran.

By Sarah A. Topol

## Photographs by Glenna Gordon

On the weekends, when Roy Gamboa was a little boy, his grandfather woke him before dawn. He would pour some coffee into a bowl of rice, and that would be the boy's breakfast. Roy knew better than to question anything; he sat quietly in his grandfather's truck as they rumbled down the big hill from their village, Hågat, to Big Navy, as the U.S. Naval Base in Guam is known. They passed through the military gates, along a dirt road and onto the shore of a little cove, next to one of America's deepest harbors, where skipjacks flipped out of the aquamarine water. The boy noodled with seashells as his grandfather cast. When his grandfather caught a fish, he would unhook it and throw it on the ground, and Roy would snatch it up and quickly stuff it, still wriggling, in the bag. If the fish weren't biting at one spot, they packed up and moved to another. No one from the Navy ever stopped the old man and the young boy.

Some mornings, his grandfather would take Roy back across the dirt road into the jungle to pick papayas, lemons and coconuts. He would thrash a course into the thicket to collect firewood from the slender trees — tangen tangen in CHamoru, the language of the Indigenous inhabitants of Guam, which Roy's grandmothers and grandfathers were. They would cut the logs into quarters to dry, and stack them higher than Roy could even reach. Other mornings, the man and the boy went to the same spot to cut the grass, all the way from the cove's blue waters to the ruins of an old cemetery. "Why are we the only ones cutting the grass here?" Roy would ask.

"Boy, this was our land before the war," his grandfather would reply, pointing to 40 acres running from the cemetery to the water to the jungle, over the road and back almost as far as their eyes could see.

"We're taking care of it because we hope, one day, in the future, our land will be returned to us."

Roy didn't really understand what his grandfather was talking about; it would take him years to realize it was related to Guam's status as an "unincorporated territory" — which means the island is a possession of the United States. It was just normal that no one residing on Guam could vote for president, that the U.S. territory had no senator and only one, nonvoting, member of the House. Roy's grandfather never spoke about how their island had been colonized for hundreds of years: first by the Spanish, beginning in 1668, and then the Americans, in 1898, until they fled in 1941, returning three years later to liberate the CHamoru people from brutal Japanese occupation.

Growing up, Roy was told that Uncle Sam had saved the CHamoru — and that in return, because their people did not have much, they gave up their sons and their daughters to military service, so others around the world could have their own freedom. "You know the saying: 'If you can read and write, thank a teacher; if you can read and write in English, thank a veteran,'" Roy told me.

Guam, with its strategic location, quickly became home to Andersen Air Force Base, where B-52 bombers deploy on a rotational basis, and Naval Base Guam was expanded. The Guam tourism board's slogan, *Where America's day begins!*, was everywhere. The Guam Chamber of Commerce proudly proclaimed the island *America in Asia!* while Guam's license plates read *Guam, U.S.A.*; but underneath that they also said *Tano Y Chamorro* — "the land of the CHamoru."

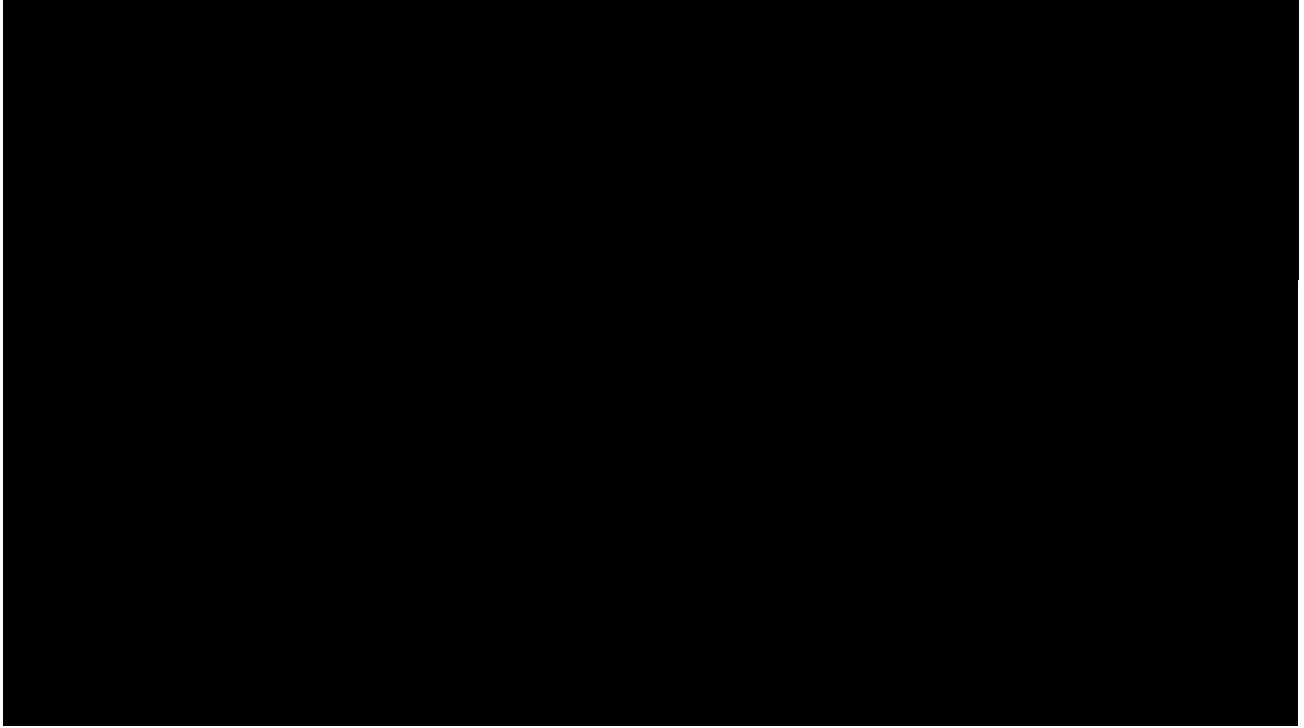
This sense of dual identity, but also a kind of second-class status, was confusing in ways Roy couldn't even begin to express, so Roy and his

family, like many around them, just didn't. It wasn't really in their culture to rock the boat or talk about some of the more unpleasant things. Roy wasn't taught that the Americans had banned the CHamoru language for decades (which is one reason Roy himself didn't speak it well) or that the Americans had been the ones to abandon the CHamoru to the Japanese in the first place, or that upon their return, the U.S. Navy annexed the entire island, and then started carving out the best land for military use, displacing entire villages including that of his paternal and maternal grandparents. Today the military owns nearly a third of Guam's 217 square miles (which is roughly the size of Chicago).

Since then, Guam has become a strategic node in America's designs in the Pacific. It is commonly referred to as "the tip of the spear" — a place from which the United States can project military might across Asia, an essential conduit to the first island chain of Japan, the Philippines and Taiwan and then on to China. As geopolitical tensions rise, Guam's importance to American military planners only increases, and so does the risk to those who live there. In every iteration of [war games between the United States and China](#) run by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (C.S.I.S.), Beijing's first strike on U.S. soil has been to bomb Guam.

Yet the island is largely forgotten by most Americans. Guam plays a central role in "homeland defense," though it rarely shows up on maps or in textbooks about the homeland — no place tries harder to show its patriotism and gets so little recognition in return. The island is missing from many NGO and U.S. government lists — for example, [a U.S.D.A. Economic Research Service poverty chart](#) — while websites like those of Air France and the World Bank list Guam as a separate place entirely. The New York Times, like many other publications, did not include

Guam or any American Pacific Island territory on the national Covid map.



Guam is one of many islands in various political alignments across the giant expanse of the Pacific that make up America's empire outside the 50 states — ranging from "unincorporated territory" to "commonwealth" to "freely associated state."

Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (C.N.M.I.), American Samoa, the Republic of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of the Marshall Islands are vitally important to the maintenance of America's global power, yet the United States' history there is rarely examined by Americans.

Now these islands are the setting of a soft-power tug of war between the United States and China, and an American military buildup in the region on a scale that hasn't been seen since World War II.

U.S. military construction projects in the Pacific Islands total nearly \$5 billion.

On Guam alone, there are currently 71 military construction projects valued at over \$4 billion, and the Department of Defense has committed to more than \$11 billion in construction there over the next five years, including a missile-defense system comprising up to 20 individual sites to achieve “360-degree defense” of the island, expected to be operational by 2027. There are three military construction projects in Micronesia for \$432 million, seven in the Northern Marianas for \$388.6 million, three projects at \$180.4 million on Wake Island and one in Palau for \$121 million.

These islands are the United States’ closest allies or territories; they are also among the poorest, most disenfranchised parts of America. If the United States decides to go to war in the Pacific, would the rest of America really understand what that means, whom it involves or what injustices it perpetuates? What does America in Asia really look like? Where does America’s day actually begin?

**The Pacific Island** region — sometimes called the Blue Continent, stretching from Australia and New Zealand to Kiribati and French Polynesia — has long been on the periphery of America’s understanding of its empire. The United States has ruled, nuked, resettled, been attacked from and fought wars on the smaller islands scattered across the Pacific over a span of more than 100 years. Yet Washington never issued a national security document for the region until September 2022, when the Biden administration released the first-ever [Pacific Partnership Strategy](#).

“The United States is a Pacific nation,” the document stated, going on

to explain that Washington has an interest in “ensuring that growing geopolitical competition does not undermine the sovereignty and security of the Pacific Islands, of the United States or of our allies and partners.” The country’s renewed attention came in response to China’s growing regional assertiveness; a rising brinkmanship between the two powers now threatens all the islands caught between. Buildup begets buildup. The difference between deterrence and escalation is a matter of perspective.

China has created islands in the South China Sea with the explicit purpose of building military bases on them. The Defense Department says Beijing has roughly 300 DF-26 intermediate-range ballistic missiles capable of striking Guam. In 2020, China’s Air Force released a slick video showing a pilot in a nuclear-capable H-6 bomber launching a cruise missile strike against an airfield that looked exactly like Andersen. In March 2021, America’s top military officer in the Indo-Pacific region told a Senate hearing that he believed China could invade Taiwan in the next six years. “I hope I am wrong,” Gen. Mike Minihan, commander of Air Mobility Command, wrote in a memo leaked in January 2023. “My gut tells me we will fight in 2025.” China’s warplane incursions into Taiwan’s air defense zone nearly doubled last year. The C.S.I.S. war games that decimated Guam every time was modeling a conflict over Taiwan set in 2026.



Naval Base Guam in Apra Harbor.

American policymakers seem equally enthusiastic to beat the drums of

war. China appears to be the only bipartisan word on the Hill these days — the Pentagon's budget for the [Pacific Deterrence Initiative](#) is up 40 percent this year; the National Security Council is stacked with China hawks talking about economic decoupling; and the State Department has set up a "China House" to track what Beijing is doing around the world. The spy-balloon incident earlier this year showed just how quickly brinkmanship can get out of control. According to U.S. officials, the balloon was originally sent to survey military activity on Guam, before it went in the wrong direction.

China is not the only perceived threat in the region. In January 2022, North Korea test-launched an intermediate-range ballistic missile capable of reaching Guam, its most significant weapons launch in years; the missile, which is capable of carrying a nuclear warhead, was nicknamed the Guam Killer when it was first tested in 2017. It would take just 18 minutes to reach the island.

America has long expected subservience from Guam. Over hundreds of years of colonization, the island has been used as an outpost, a naval base, a launching pad and a pawn. A poem people often cited to me about Guam is titled ["My Island Is One Big American Footnote."](#)

Footnote or not, from the time of their acquisition Guam and the other territories exerted their own subtle influence on the United States. The country wasn't colloquially referred to as "America" until 1898. Theodore Roosevelt popularized the term in speeches after the country became much greater than a federation of states. Three years after Manifest Destiny's conquest of the American West ended, the country began to expand overseas. First, it took possession of dozens of uninhabited islands in the Caribbean and the Pacific, primarily for the harvesting of guano. The United States purchased Alaska from Russia

in 1867. In 1893, Americans overthrew the monarchy in Hawaii, then later annexed the island. In 1898, under the Treaty of Paris that ended the Spanish-American War, Spain sold the United States the Philippines for \$20 million and included Puerto Rico and Guam for free. Wake Island and American Samoa followed in 1899, and the United States purchased the Virgin Islands in 1917. By the end of World War II, 135 million people lived under U.S. rule outside the continental United States; America's overseas territories made up nearly a fifth of its land area, according to Daniel Immerwahr, associate professor of history at Northwestern University, in his book "How to Hide an Empire."

Guam's value as a strategic location was evident immediately — a convenient point between Hawaii and the Philippines, the island was to become a naval coaling and watering station. Guam was put under the control of the Navy, and the CHamoru became American subjects, not U.S. citizens. "Fewer permanent guarantees of liberty and property rights exist now than under Spanish domain," a 1901 CHamoru petition to the Naval authorities requesting a civilian government read. The Navy blocked their requests. As Robert F. Rogers, retired professor of political history at the University of Guam, wrote in "Destiny's Landfall": "Until World War II, the island would be administered as if it were a warship, the 'U.S.S. Guam,' with the governor as captain, American military personnel as crew and the CHamorus as mess attendants."

In 1941, as Washington watched the Japanese buildup across the Pacific, the United States began evacuating all American military dependents from Guam. In an earlier military assessment in the run-up to the war, the Navy graded Guam as "Category F" — unworthy of protecting and fortifying. All that remained to face the Japanese was a small Navy detachment and the CHamoru Insular Force Guard, who

had a few basic training rifles. Many of them went home to protect their own families and land. After two days of bombing, on Dec. 10, the U.S.-military-appointed governor surrendered.

The Japanese rounded up CHamoru leaders with ties to the United States, Insular Force Guard members were taken as prisoners of war and CHamoru women were raped. The entire population of Sumay village, where Roy Gamboa's family lived, was displaced. In 1944, with the American recapture of Guam clearly on the horizon, the Japanese launched a campaign of rapes and mass killings. Though some CHamoru tried to fight the Japanese, the overwhelming narrative holds that American soldiers were the saviors of Guam. Every year on July 21, the island shuts down for the Liberation Day Parade, a grand military procession down Marine Corps Drive to mark the anniversary of Uncle Sam's return.

"One of those things that comes about from a long colonial experience is this idea that things change because somebody brings it to you — you are not the agent of change," Michael Lujan Bevacqua, historian and curator of the Guam Museum, told me. "When you're thinking about remembering the war, do you put a brave American soldier, or do you put a shirtless CHamoru man coming out of a concentration camp — which one fits? At the time, CHamorus couldn't see themselves in that role."

Upon America's return at the end of World War II, the island reverted to Naval control. CHamoru were denied U.S. citizenship, and land dispossession was rampant. Sumay was developed into Naval Base Guam. Nearly 11,000 CHamoru — half the population at that time — lost their property. (A class-action lawsuit filed in 1983 ended with a settlement of \$39.5 million, a sum many still believe was too low.)

Traditional farmers, like Roy's grandfather, now found themselves in the daily labor economy for the first time. He went to work at the Navy Ship Repair Facility, painting and reconstructing boats. Those fortunate enough to find employment still faced discrimination. In the Navy itself, locals were only allowed to work as waiters or mess-hall attendants. Pay rates for Americans were almost twice that of natives'.

At the time, Guam's status complicated the military's land-taking — it is illegal to seize land that's not within the United States by eminent domain — and so, in 1950, Congress passed the Organic Act, which established Guam as a territory, granted citizenship to inhabitants who traced their ancestry to the 1898 Treaty of Paris and provided for an appointed governor, an elected legislature and a judicial branch. (Puerto Ricans, colonized in the same Spanish concession as Guam, were granted American citizenship in 1917.) Guam remained under federal control; the Navy approved who could or couldn't arrive on the island. It was only in 1968 that Guam was permitted to elect its own governor.

The federal government's expansive power over Guam exists because of a series of Supreme Court rulings called the Insular Cases that began in 1901, five years after the court allowed "separate but equal" segregation. The U.S. Congress already had plenary power over all American territories under Article IV, Section 3, Clause 2 of the Constitution, referred to as the Territorial Clause. In the Insular Cases, the court reasoned that certain U.S. territories were "inhabited by alien races," so the full Constitution did not have to apply there, and they were not assumed to be on a path to statehood. As a result, any legislation passed by Guam's local government can be overruled by Congress in perpetuity. The island is governed by consultation, not

consent.

In 1946, eight United Nations member countries including the United States created a list of their territories “whose people have not yet attained a full measure of self-government,” in accordance with the U.N. Charter’s principle of self-determination. Guam is among the 17 that remain there today. Delegates from the Guam Decolonization Commission regularly travel to New York to appear before the United Nations Special Committee on Decolonization to bring attention to the failure of the self-determination process. Testimony is given by the Guam delegation, the U.S. government delegation and an independent expert, and results in a draft resolution. Every time the Guam delegation requests the United States allow a U.N. fact-finding mission to assess the colony’s trajectory toward self-determination, the request is denied.

**It took me** three flights and more than 30 hours to travel the 8,000 miles to Guam from New York City. The island’s G.D.P. is roughly a third tourism and a third military, so there are basically no business hotels, only beach resorts. In the mornings, my hotel elevator was full of uniformed service members cramming in next to multigenerational Korean families on holiday — grandmothers, parents and toddlers wearing inflatable life vests and full-length rash guards. Clutching snorkels and sunscreen, they wandered among camouflage and combat boots.

Outside the resorts, Guam looks like strip-mall America on military steroids. Fast-food and drive-through joints are everywhere. Chain-link fences surround high schools. Sidewalks are few, and there is no functional public-transit system. The sole public hospital is in such poor shape that the Army Corps of Engineers told the governor it would

be cheaper just to build a new one.

The U.S. military presence across the island has become so normalized that it's part of the fabric of society. Reminders of wars past and present are ubiquitous. Monuments and veterans' cemeteries are around every corner: Chagui'an Massacre Memorial, War in the Pacific National Historical Park and Mañenggon Memorial Foundation Peace Park. Signs cautioning pedestrians about unexploded ordnance from World War II are common, and it seems as if everywhere you look there's a military recruitment office of some kind. R.O.T.C. is active in high schools and has its own dormitory floor at the University of Guam. Since a third of Guam's land belongs to the Defense Department, it's hard to go anywhere without encountering military fencing or giant radar defense installations that look like white golf balls the size of mansions.

Guam is also the site of the [new Marine Corps Base Camp Blaz](#), the first Marine base to be activated since 1952. While geopolitical tensions have sharpened Washington's attention on the region, the decision to build Camp Blaz had little to do with the current U.S.-China rivalries. In 1995, two Marines and a Naval medic abducted a 12-year-old schoolgirl walking home from a stationery store in Okinawa. They threw her into the back seat of a rented car, then taped her mouth, her arms and legs and her eyes. They drove to an isolated farm road, where they beat and raped her. The incident was far from the first instance of U.S. service-member violence against the Indigenous people of Okinawa, but its heinousness sparked waves of protests that led the U.S. government to agree to remove a substantial number of troops stationed there since Japan's surrender in World War II.

The story of how these troops were moved to Guam, and the response

of the local community, offers a case study in the dynamics that define relations between the military and the islanders. In 2006, Washington and Tokyo announced they had agreed to transfer 8,600 of the 18,000 U.S. Marines from Okinawa to Guam. No one asked anyone on Guam how they felt about it. When the Defense Department released an environmental-impact statement in 2009, it was over 8,000 pages long and allotted 90 days for community comment. It proposed dredging nearly 72 acres of live coral reef; drilling an additional 22 wells into the island's northern aquifer; absorbing even more land, amounting to roughly 42 percent of the island; increasing the population by 80,000; and constructing a live firing range in Pãgat village, home to a sacred CHamoru cultural and burial site.

There was an unprecedented outcry. A group of activists came together under the umbrella of We Are Guåhan, the CHamoru name for Guam, and pulled apart every page of the document to create a CliffsNotes version of the plan. They brought illustrated poster boards to town halls to engage the community on the dangers of the expansion. In the end, they solicited 10,000 comments — said to be a Defense Department record. In 2011, We Are Guåhan sued the department over the proposed destruction of Pãgat, saying the military had not adequately explored other locations for a live firing range. We Are Guåhan's lawsuit prompted the Navy to make changes to its plan — a remarkable victory for a small group of Indigenous activists facing off with the military that had controlled their island for so long. The following year, the department proposed reducing the number of Marines coming to Guam and moving the training range to Litekyan, on a cliff above the site of an ancient CHamoru village as well as the habitat of the sole remaining endangered hayun lagu tree technically within the military's existing footprint.



Today the construction of Marine Corps Base Camp Blaz is nearly completed. It is named after the first CHamoru general, Vicente T. Blaz, known as Ben, who went on to become Guam's Republican representative to the House from 1985 to 1993. (In a 1991 letter to the editor in *The New York Times*, Blaz deployed a phrase about Guam's political status in America that is repeated as dogma on the island today: "[Equal in war, unequal in peace.](#)")

When I visited Camp Blaz in December, the controversial fifth and final live firing range on Litekyan was proceeding rapidly. The base would bring 5,000 Marines, a third of whom would be coming with their families, with the rest on staggered six-month rotations. (The missile-defense system would bring in at least another thousand service members.) Currently, military personnel and their families number around 22,000, while the civilian population is 154,000 — 41 percent of whom identify as CHamoru. The military pays its troops in Guam a monthly overseas housing allowance (though Guam is not "overseas" as the word is normally understood; it is part of America). The O.H.A. — which, at \$2,205 and up, is higher than the domestic allowance — inflates the market and makes apartments impossible for locals to afford. Everyone agrees Camp Blaz will only make the islandwide housing crisis worse.

But the U.S. military is not just an outside force occupying the island. Of the 154,000 civilians who live in Guam, an estimated 7,500 are veterans of the armed services, one of the highest rates per capita in the nation (though Guam ranks at the very bottom for veteran services). Roughly 3 percent of the territory's work force is in the Guam Army and Air Force National Guard — and when their units were called up and deployed to Afghanistan, every village on the island felt it. So many

people are in the service that casualty rates in Guam from the forever wars are four and a half times the national average. Every extended family has at least one member who is a veteran.

It's not necessarily love for country that attracts many; it's the benefits. Roughly 17 percent of the island lives in poverty (compared with a 12 percent national average), and in any given quarter, according to Lisa Linda Natividad, a professor of social work at the University of Guam, 38 to 42 percent of Chamoru families are on food stamps. Military recruits are issued IDs that grant them access to multiple bases to buy cheaper groceries. Because of the huge distances and the Jones Act, which restricts transportation of cargo between U.S. ports to U.S.-owned, U.S.-crewed, U.S.-registered and U.S.-built ships, a gallon of milk in the local supermarket costs \$17. A gallon of milk at the commissary on base costs \$5.97. There are base-only franchises for cheaper fast food and subsidized gas. Add to this the promise of medical coverage, dental care and a huge sign-up bonus.

As a territory, Guam gets a small fraction of the federal funding a state does. When Congress passed the Covid relief bill, Guam got one-tenth of the minimum amount allotted for a state. Those who live in Guam are not entitled to Supplemental Security Income (what most people call disability). Medicaid is currently capped at \$137 million; the rest has to come from the territory's budget, unlike in a state, where there is no cap.

The Defense Department activated Camp Blaz on Oct. 1, 2020. Many are still hoping for the job creation the military touted, though even the pro-buildup members of Guam's Chamber of Commerce admitted to me that it has yet to really materialize. (Much of the labor for the base construction was done by H-2B visa workers.) Anecdotally a large

portion of Guam's population supports the buildup, but even many in this camp seemed nervous, concerned over adding so many people to an already overwhelmed island. "Are we going to flip over?" one woman asked me, not entirely joking. "You've seen this island. Where will the cars go? Where will we go?"

Civil-military relations are already low. Everywhere I went during my time on the island was totally segregated — from dinner at California Pizza Kitchen to a U.S. Fish & Wildlife-sponsored tent by the beach inviting kids to weave and paint plants. Military are supposed to receive a cultural training session when they arrive, but multiple service members I spoke to didn't remember taking one. The ones who did didn't seem to have been given much of a primer on Guam's history, status or CHamoru culture. When I asked about places where locals and the military mingled, people thought about it awhile and directed me to strip clubs and church.

**Like many on** the island, Roy grew up and joined the military. With special permission from his parents, he enlisted in the Guam Army National Guard reserves at 17. "I was just a dumb kid," he told me. "I wanted to get out of my mother's house." When he arrived at basic training in Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., in 1994, his fellow recruits asked him questions he wasn't expecting:

"Where the hell is Guam? Is that, like, near Guatemala?"

"Yeah, in the dictionary!" he would reply.

"Damn, bro, you speak really good English!"

"Thanks! I learned it two months ago!"

"Do you all live in huts?"

Other Pacific Islanders would share stories about the ignorant things

they heard and how they replied — telling their peers that they were chiefs or princes back home, and that their people rowed them from Guam to Hawaii in order to catch the flight to basic training. Pacific Islanders and those from other U.S. territories stuck together. They had to develop a sense of humor about these things, but other daily indignities grated. It wasn't just the inability to vote for the commander in chief they served, but how the military-designated voting rep walked around handing out absentee ballots, shouting: "All right, New York, here's your absentee ballot! New Jersey, here you go! Guam? No. Puerto Rico? No. Virgin Islands? Nope."

After Sept. 11, Roy watched the coverage endlessly. He was angry. He was patriotic. Or perhaps he just wanted to put his training to use. "Maybe it was bravado and machismo, but I wanted to see what war was like," he told me. "I wanted to fight and defend my country. I felt personally ticked off that someone had attacked the United States." Roy watched as the Guam Army National Guard's units remained stationary. "I kept asking the National Guard unit: Are we going to deploy? Is this unit going to deploy?"

When Roy couldn't get a straight answer, he decided to join the Marines. He was sure they would see combat. When he got to Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune in North Carolina, he was 27, older than most of his drill instructors. At Camp Lejeune, Roy met a soldier named Michael Franquez, and the two quickly became friends. Michael carried a Guam flag with him during his deployments to Iraq, tucked inside his flak jacket as a talisman. When Roy's turn came to deploy to Falluja, Michael gave him the flag. "Keep it folded, keep it inside your flak vest, it'll keep you safe," Michael told him. Michael had written his own name and deployment dates on it.

When he got to Iraq, Roy tucked the flag into his vest and carried it everywhere — it was there when his Humvee crashed into a HESCO barrier. Roy smashed his face and then his whole body followed, right into the front windshield. He suffered a concussion. At the base hospital, they saw that his spinal cord was swollen and called for a medevac, but the base was under attack and no helicopters could fly in or out. When Roy finally came to, the doctors told him they had not been sure he was going to make it, that it was a miracle he survived. The flag made it through unscathed.

The doctors told Roy that if he had an M.R.I. he could be medically discharged. But they needed every body, so Roy decided he would push through and see out his deployment. When Roy finally came back to Camp Lejeune, he signed the flag and gave it back to Michael. After Michael did another tour, he gave it back to Roy, who took it with him when he deployed to Ramadi, in central Iraq, in 2007 as a sergeant in supply and logistics in the infantry. Roy's unit traveled from outpost to outpost. From his arrival until the time they secured the city, 12 members of his unit were killed.

The war was so much more brutal and futile than Roy had imagined — “liberation” so different than what was commemorated in the parades down Marine Corps Drive of his youth. There was no celebrating the arriving American soldiers. Roy had started to wonder what the mission was meant to accomplish. Did any of these people even want them there? He was no longer focused on fighting for country, but more on his brothers to his left and his right.

When Roy's contract was unilaterally extended for three months, he was furious. In a fit of anger, he took the Guam flag out of his vest and ran it up a makeshift flagpole outside his hooch, 20 feet into the sky,

violating military policy. That night, Post-it notes from Islanders from Guam, Saipan, Hawaii and Puerto Rico appeared on his door. Roy organized a meetup, and they got a burn barrel, put a stainless-steel grill on top of it and decided they were going to barbecue as they did at home. The first time they met, nobody came empty-handed: The island custom is to bring something — drinks, chips, canned Spam. It turned into a weekly gathering — the one thing that got Roy through those last few months.

**When Roy returned** to Guam in 2008, he got a job in sales and rose through the ranks to become a manager, but it was hard to adjust to civilian life. His greatest struggle was with mental health. Roy's thoughts scared him. Ideas of harming others would just pop into his mind out of the blue. He could be having a perfectly fine day and a thought would come in, like, "Hey, there's this stupid dude on the side of the road, I could just run him over with my damn truck." He didn't know what to do.

Roy's unit lost 16 men during their deployments, but they lost more to suicide after they came home. Roy would check their Facebook groups and see their unit crest with a black stripe across it and immediately he knew. Who did we lose today? Why did we lose them today? Roy had been older than many of them — kids who were just starting to figure out their lives used as cannon fodder for the broader goals of empire Roy couldn't even rationalize anymore. He flew to all the funerals.

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In 2010, mental-health care on Guam for PTSD was nonexistent. The

closest Veterans Affairs Medical Center was in Hawaii, 4,000 miles away, so getting set up for services and receiving specialized care was a nightmare. It took a few months for Roy even to get a referral for treatment. When he saw his first V.A. psychologist, it was on a videoconference call with someone in Hawaii. It was too impersonal, too weird, and Roy never called back.

The disproportionate lack of V.A. services in the territories is well documented. In 2020, the Center for a New American Security found that while the average state offered 36 distinct benefits to veterans and military families (and the highest offered 60), Guam offered 14. Together, the territories averaged 11 benefits. "Veterans in the U.S. territories are a largely forgotten and unsupported population, despite high rates of service that outpace many U.S. states," the report's authors wrote.

"We've had many veterans from Guam leave their homeland because they've heard stories of, 'It's better in California, it's better in Washington, it's better in Texas,'" Roy explained. It's not just dearth of services; Guam's V.A. system is also wracked with delays. A week after Roy had a heart attack, the community-based outpatient system still hadn't processed his referral to a cardiologist in Hawaii. He didn't want to wait, so he paid for his own ticket to get there. Many other veterans would not be able to afford the expensive flight.

"So many veterans just don't even ask for the support they need," Roy said. "They don't want to admit to being what they see as 'weak,' and when they do, it's so hard to get services, they often just give up." He knew because he had been the same way. After several attempts at mental-health support, he decided he didn't want to have anything to do with the V.A. setup. But he was dealing with a lot — stress, anxiety,

PTSD, some battles on the home front. He felt isolated. A friend of his suggested he talk to John Concepcion. John had served in the Guam Army National Guard and had completed a deployment to Afghanistan. They had some similar experiences, and once they began talking, they just understood. They started trying to keep tabs on each other.

How are you doing, man?

It's been a rough week.

OK, I'll come up, hang out.

As time went on, John started to call Roy about other people. "Hey man, do you think you want to help me out?" he would ask. "This person called and told me that he's on the verge of pulling the trigger."

The two men would drive out together, without really knowing the right thing to say or do. But it kept happening. So many veterans were in need of care. John and Roy would just visit with them, the ones who were telling them, I'm ready to hang myself, or I've got a pistol in my hand, or I'm sitting on my roof ready to jump. They kept in touch. When the island emerged from lockdown in January 2021, John, Roy and another veteran organized their first in-person group meeting. They called it the Battle Buddy Talk, and 25 veterans gathered. They decided to officially establish the group as an NGO, which they named GotYourSix71 (671 is Guam's area code). John became president and Roy became vice president.

The protests against Camp Blaz had resurfaced longstanding divisions in the community, where families are large and everyone knows everyone or is somehow related; arguments among friends and family had grown atypically heated. Some took the antibuildup sentiment personally as targeting their own family members in the service. They



believed Guam needed more American military for defense during this time of turbulence, not less. Others argued the CHamoru culture of hospitality was being taken advantage of again.

Roy and John were approached by Roman Dela Cruz, a CHamoru cultural advocate and president of the Acho Marianas, a traditional slingstone-throwing organization, who heard about GotYourSix71 and invited them to hold their weekly meetings at the Sagan Kotturan CHamoru — a cultural center that hosts traditional artists, bakers, healers and seafarers. The buildup was happening whether the community liked it or not, and Roman thought having the veterans as a bridge between the activists and the arriving Marines could have its advantages, but first they needed to repair relations within the community.

“The veterans are in a very unique situation, where they can communicate with both sides,” Roman told me. “They are going to play a very critical part as things surge forward.” He saw the veterans as descendants of the ancient CHamoru warfighters, who had taken on the Spanish conquistadors with slings in hundreds of sail-powered outrigger canoes, circling them at two to three times their speed. Acho Marianas was revitalizing CHamoru slinging, competing at tournaments around the world. Roman offered to teach GotYourSix71 members how to sling, and Roy and John offered to teach Acho Marianas members some jungle-warfare tactics. But when the veterans showed up, Roman was the only one who talked to them.

“Sometimes wearing that uniform can carry some kind of a negative connotation,” Roy explained, “because Islanders look at it as, Oh, you went over to the ‘patriotic American side,’ and you’re not local anymore, all you are is a Marine, all you are is a veteran.”

Over the next couple of weeks, the veterans won the Acho Marianas over. They spoke the same language, enjoyed the same food and liked one another's company. Eventually, Roy and John realized that the sound of balls and stones hitting target posts was triggering for many veterans, so the group got permission to move a bit farther up the hill, where there was a derelict 40-foot container. They painted it green, built a cement and wooden deck and strung up a retractable tarp roof for shade. It became their home base.

GotYourSix71 also runs a monthly meeting called Social Grounds, where the group rents out a cafe and gets veterans and their families to sit together for an activity. During the session I went to, three dozen attendees were building model cars. I had come straight from Warrior Day, an all-day recruitment event held by the Guam National Guard. About two dozen high school juniors and seniors gathered in the National Guard base that morning, getting a sign-up pitch to perform drills for two days a month in exchange for dental care, scholarship money and cheaper food and gas not just for themselves but also their parents and grandparents. They got matching T-shirts, crawled through an inflatable obstacle course and shot simulation rifles at a wall-size screen. Driving from young, lithe fresh recruits to struggling, injured veterans felt like twisted time travel, a discomfoting feeling made more urgent on an island that would be the first to see destruction — and among people who would be first to see deployment — in the event of a war.

When I mentioned this to Roy, he nodded. "This is why we are doing this," he told me quietly. "For things to be better for him when he gets out." He was looking at his son, Roy Jr. The 9-year-old was absorbed in building a model. Roy Jr. was serious, dressed in a green shirt neatly

tucked into camouflage pants, and spouted military history and terminology. Roy told me he didn't want his son to enlist; he would prefer for his kids to stay out of the services completely, but he recognized there was nothing that drew a child toward something more strongly than a parent's disapproval, so he was trying to be supportive, talking to his son about naval officer school.

I asked Roy what role he thought Guam's status played in their struggles for better care. "It has everything to do with our status," he replied. "The people of Guam are only important when there's threats from China, when there's threats from Korea, but we're such a small number, we're the pawn in the global scheme of things."

For nearly eight decades since it was placed on the U.N.'s decolonization list, Guam had been waiting for a resolution to its political status. When I asked what he wanted for Guam's future, Roy, who was so clear and emphatic about the situation for veterans, grew vague. He listed the benefits of statehood, then independence, and ended up in the middle again. Talking about political status was a difficult topic for many in Guam, so I turned off my recorder and asked whether he was comfortable telling me what he really believed. Roy said he'd think about it and get back to me.

**Across the Pacific**, the U.S. military has adopted the ["agile combat employment" doctrine](#) — a way to move forces around to confuse an enemy and avoid concentrating forces in one place. Guam would be the "catapult," as Esther Sablan, an executive director at Andersen, put it when I visited: a place from which, in the event of war, allied forces would spring toward China through other islands like steppingstones. "What we don't want to do is have to build bases all over the place," Rear Adm. Benjamin Nicholson, commander of Joint Region Marianas

at the time, told me. “Because we have a main hub here in Guam, if we need to flow forces to another area because that’s where the threat is, then we can quickly flow there. If we’ve already set everything up, that gives us the ability to be very agile.”

And so, it would be from the Northern Mariana Islands — a 14-island archipelago north of Guam — and other U.S.-affiliated states across the Pacific that the theoretical war with China would be waged.

At the airport in Saipan, the capital of the Northern Marianas, my bags and I were weighed together on a giant scale and cleared to fly 15.5 miles to Tinian, the first location of the Pentagon’s plan to expand infrastructure on U.S.-affiliated islands across the Pacific to become “forward operating sites” — which contain pre-positioned supplies for war fighting but which the U.S. government doesn’t technically classify as a base.

In the cockpit of a Star Marianas Air Piper PA-32-300 Cherokee Six, the controls looked straight out of an old arcade game, and it was so hot the pilot left my passenger door open as we taxied to the runway. We rose slowly, the propeller spinning as the ocean water churned below. The tiny plane banked right and then left, straight into a cloud, with no visibility inside the gray. Emerging from the mist, we could see North Field, the site of several runways on the north of Tinian built during World War II from which two American planes took off to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

From behind me, over the din of the propeller, Deborah Fleming, a community historian and my host on Tinian, beckoned me to look left: In the middle of jungle, tractors and bright red earth emerged violently from Tinian’s emerald green. The construction of the Divert Airfield — a

facility being built as a place to divert planes in the case of an attack on Andersen Airfield, its existence a testament to expectations around Guam's vulnerability — was well underway.

The present-day Northern Marianas were conquered first by the Spanish, who sold them to the Germans, who lost them to the Japanese. On Dec. 7, 1941, just hours after bombing Pearl Harbor, Japanese planes taking off from Saipan bombed Guam. (Because the Northern Marianas and Guam are over the international date line, the date was Dec. 8 there.) When Guam capitulated two days later, the Japanese administered the island with the help of Chamorro translators from Saipan and a neighboring island called Rota. As a result, a rift opened within the Indigenous group that continues to cleave them today. (Though they are the same people, CHamoru on Guam and Chamorro in the Northern Mariana Islands spell the same word differently.)

After Allied victory, Japan's entire Pacific Island empire was placed into a trust of roughly 100 inhabited islands spread out over an area the size of the contiguous United States to be administered by Washington, which was charged "to promote the development of the inhabitants of the Trust Territory toward self-government or independence." (This included the present-day Northern Marianas, Micronesia, the Marshall Islands and Palau.) Saipan eventually became the headquarters of the Trust, which was administered first by the Navy and then the Department of the Interior, and which arbitrarily divided the islands into six districts, with each one voting to decide its fate.

The commonwealth's founding fathers, as the group of legislators are known, wrote the Covenant, a governing document that outlined the archipelago's right to control its internal matters while granting the U.S.

federal government sovereignty over the Northern Marianas' foreign affairs and defense. The Covenant specified which articles of the U.S. Constitution applied, and fundamental changes to the document can be made only by mutual consent between the Northern Marianas and Congress. The Northern Marianas have the right to call for direct negotiations with the federal government on specific issues. This arrangement was made possible by the Insular Cases.

In 1975, 75 percent of Northern Marianas residents voted to adopt the document. (They also voted repeatedly to integrate with Guam, but Guam rejected the proposal.) Northern Marianas residents are now U.S. citizens without federal voting rights. They serve in the U.S. armed forces, but do not have their own V.A. office.

As part of the negotiations, the U.S. government leased two-thirds of the land on Tinian for 50 years to build a military base, saying that it would provide a boost to the economy, and also promising to build a school and provide medical services. Residents are still waiting. Today the 40-square-mile island, home to 2,000 people, has no hospital or dentist, one gas station, one semifunctional A.T.M. and a few small grocery stores. The main employer is the mayor's office. In a 2010 census, 44 percent of the households on Tinian fell below the poverty line.

When the American military took Tinian from the Japanese during World War II, they laid out roads in the same manner as Manhattan — with Broadway, Wall Street, 86th, 42nd and so on. That morning, Fleming took me to North Field, where American service members built the largest airport in the world at the time, from which planes took off every three minutes during the last year of the war. We drove up Broadway to the two bombing pits that were used to load nuclear

weapons into planes, now encased in glass like a mausoleum of the grotesque. Atomic Bomb Pit No. 1 loaded the five-ton uranium bomb, Little Boy, that killed over 100,000 people in one morning explosion. Atomic Bomb Pit No. 2 contained the plutonium bomb, Fat Man, that instantly killed 40,000 people in Nagasaki. Standing at the glass, the duality of past destruction — overlaid with the prospect of the future decimation that would require use of the Divert Airfield — felt like vertigo.

The thousands of troops relocating from Okinawa to Camp Blaz would need places to train, so the Defense Department decided to use the land they had leased for a base on Tinian to create what they called the C.N.M.I. Joint Military Training facility. The 2015 blueprint included ripping out a reef to practice amphibious landings, high-hazard impact training — shooting and bombing — ship-to-shore launches using howitzers and live-bombing a smaller island just north of Tinian called Pagan Island. There would be no permanently stationed troops, no base, just destruction. The department's plans were so outrageous that there was a huge backlash: Guam gets 10,000 troops and the promise of a military economy that comes with it, and Tinian gets bullets and bombs?

"Tinian is generally very accepting of military training, but that was the time everyone came out and said *hell, no*," said Kimberlyn King-Hinds, the Commonwealth Ports Authority chairwoman and local counsel for the community groups that sued the U.S. military over the plan. Deborah Fleming was the spokeswoman for one of the groups. They lost, so they pressured local leadership to take up the issue. The governor and the mayor got involved. Negotiations over the scope of the training grounds continue.

"There's just a lot of people who think they can come to these islands and just get away with saying whatever and doing whatever," King-Hinds told me. She described an encounter at the Tinian mayor's office with 20 military personnel, including a lawyer from the Pentagon, with whom she ended up in a bitter argument. "I just cursed them out. 'I don't give a [expletive] who you think you are, I don't know what [expletive] rights you think you have here.' You know what they did? They sent the F.B.I. to investigate whether I was a potential domestic terrorist. So there's an F.B.I. agent who's going around the community asking everyone, 'Do I have propensity for violence?'" (The Navy and F.B.I. did not respond to requests for comment.)

Still, the conversations I had about the military buildup in the Northern Marianas felt different from those I had in Guam. In the Northern Marianas, people were demanding their rights. They expected to be heard. "The difference between Guam and us, we chose to be in political union with the United States, and so when we enter into the agreement, we willingly leased two-thirds of Tinian for these purposes," King-Hinds told me. "Whereas Guam, they became a part of the American family as a spoil of war."

Yet in practice, the Northern Marianas has lost every important court case when it comes to gray areas in the Covenant's separation of powers. They lost control over immigration after a series of scandals over sweatshops — clothing companies that came in to make "Made in U.S.A."-labeled clothes but paid workers pennies. In 2005, they lost their claim to 200 nautical miles off their coast. (The United States has since transferred three miles back.) They also lost the right to submerged properties — all lands below the high-water line. People I spoke to there were surprised by the ruling, because in the view of the



Indigenous people in the region, land and water make up the same continuous territory, so it hadn't even occurred to them it would be a cause for negotiation.

The biggest legal loss was perhaps over the protection of Indigenous land rights. Currently, all land that is not privately held belongs to the native inhabitants of the Northern Mariana Islands — an arrangement made possible by the Insular Cases. But as native Chamorro and native Carolinians — a group that migrated from present-day Micronesia and Palau in the 19th century — are outnumbered by new arrivals, the Northern Marianas amended its Constitution to ensure any future vote on changing land ownership could only be made by these two groups. It was struck down as being a race-based voting classification.

When the federal government saw fit, the authorities took what they wanted. The whole setup seemed like another version of colonialism in a slightly more modern outfit. "You could certainly make a case that it's all a sham, it's all [expletive], that they just pull the wool over the eyes of the United Nations, of the Marianas, of the whole world," Joseph Horey, who argued many of the cases on behalf of plaintiffs from the Northern Marianas, told me. "But the problem with it is, if that's true, what do we do? It's a never-ending battle to make the Covenant protections real and to govern themselves rather than be governed by Congress, be governed by the States, be governed by the military, be governed by someone far, far away who thinks they know what's best or what's right or what's enlightened."

**Hundreds of miles** to the east and west of Guam, a thousand islands and atolls make up Palau, the Marshall Islands and Micronesia, their 200,000 citizens caught in a vortex of geopolitical competition between the United States and China. The three countries elect their

own governments, craft their own foreign policy and have votes in the United Nations, but they are deeply intertwined with the United States and integral to the maintenance of American security and overseas empire.

The U.S. military has at least three construction projects breaking ground in Micronesia, worth \$432 million in total. In Palau, the Defense Department is building a high-frequency radar system and expanding a port and an airport, projects worth at least \$121 million. The United States already operates a missile defense base in the Marshall Islands.

The unique political relationship of these three countries to the United States is called free association — each country granted the United States the prerogative to operate military bases from their territories and to deny use of their land, air and sea to any country that is seen as a threat to American national security. In exchange, the United States agreed to provide each country with security guarantees and the right for its citizens to reside and work in the U.S. without a visa, in perpetuity. This part of the Compact of Free Association (COFA) agreements is immutable, subject to termination only by mutual agreement. (As a result, citizens of the Marshall Islands, Micronesia and Palau serve in the U.S. armed forces, though their access to V.A. benefits is even more difficult than from Guam or the Northern Marianas.)

But as the United States takes renewed interest in the region, the realities of the poverty there — and America's direct culpability in it — are inescapable. Both the Marshall Islands and Micronesia are poor, aid-dependent economies. They rank in the bottom third of all the countries on the [U.N.'s human-development index](#). (Palau, held up by many I met in the Pacific to be the success case of the region, ranks

significantly higher on all counts.) Corruption is rampant. [Transparency International polling](#) found that 61 percent of people in Micronesia using a public service have paid a bribe; 58 percent have been offered money in exchange for their vote.

It was not supposed to be this way. These countries were in the same U.S.-administered Pacific Trust Territory as the Northern Marianas. After nearly four decades of American stewardship, all three voted for the status of “freely associated states” — a term that created a political arrangement that did not previously exist. The compacts signed by each newly established country included a round of economic assistance, initially set to expire in 2003, that was extended for another 20 years. The second, and supposedly final, round created trust funds intended to be built up through joint contributions that would provide future government revenue.

For years, the countries cautioned they needed a third round of funding, but successive U.S. administrations brushed them off. That changed abruptly in 2019, when Beijing announced something that it had never done before — it gave a \$2 million contribution to the Micronesian Compact Trust Fund. Three weeks later, Mike Pompeo, the secretary of state at the time, announced Washington was ready to negotiate.

“The response was so incredibly obvious,” Giff Johnson, editor of The Marshall Islands Journal, told me in Majuro, the country’s capital. “The Chinese play a long game, they’re very deliberate, and you can see the progression from the ‘80s and ‘90s, the diplomacy. Whereas the Americans are, every four years, around the cycle of the presidential election, checking to see what’s going on. If nothing’s going on, the Pacific is just considered to be an American place and that everything’s

under control. But now, suddenly, it's not, and so that's elevated the interest level."

Beijing's outreach since the 1990s has been anchored in economics. By 2019, the P.R.C. had established itself as the second-largest lender to the Pacific Island states. The previous year, China surpassed Australia to become their largest trading partner. It is also the largest destination for regional exports, like minerals, fish and timber.

Chinese foreign assistance in Micronesia was everywhere when I visited the island Pohnpei last winter. The P.R.C. funded a road project on the island and built the Pohnpei State Administrative Building and the Tuna Commission building. In Kolonia village in Pohnpei, a green sheet-metal-covered basketball court proclaimed itself the KOLONIA-CHINA FRIENDSHIP CENTER in huge white letters. Around the corner, I saw a sign for the Micronesia-China Friendship Association, but every time I walked by it the door was locked. When I asked a group of students doing a bake sale next to the basketball court, they said they had never seen anyone there. (The Marshall Islands and Palau receive aid from Taiwan; they are among the 13 countries, including the Vatican, that have diplomatic relations with Taipei. Micronesia has diplomatic relations with the P.R.C.)

The skirmishing for influence has reached almost comical proportions. In Micronesia, both the United States and China jockeyed to put their names on big projects, but neither seemed particularly interested in funding ongoing maintenance. As a result, large construction projects that presumably sounded great on paper often sat damaged or empty. The P.R.C.-built government building had holes in the ceiling where I could see the rafters, and loose wires dangling out. I heard a story from Stephen Finnen, former Rotary president in Pohnpei, about U.S. Navy

Seabees putting a new roof on the public library. They took off half the old roof before they went to the hardware store and learned it would take six weeks to ship the replacement sheets. "So the library had no roof," Finnen told me.

New schools were built with similar ignorance of daily realities in the region — with, for instance, air-conditioning hookups instead of traditional slatted window louvers. "It's like somebody said, This is a hot place, you're going to use air-conditioning all the time," Finnen explained. "But the education department can't afford to pay for the A.C."

"Competition with China is the lens that we look at the region through, but that's not the lens that a lot of Pacific Islanders want to solely look at their own engagement with the U.S. through," said Michael Walsh, a researcher at Georgetown University who served as the chair of the Asian and Pacific Security Affairs subcommittee of the Biden campaign during the 2020 presidential election. "They understand what our motivation is in increasing engagement with the region, and they're willing to instrumentalize that, but the problem with all of this is, it's not responding to the needs of the people. It hasn't over decades."

The Biden administration's September 2022 Pacific Partnership Strategy promised to appoint the first U.S. envoy to the Pacific Island Forum (a regional bloc), increase economic support and help combat climate change — a crucial area of concern given the delicate ecology and rising sea levels affecting the region.

A frenzy of diplomatic overtures preceded the announcement. In February, Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Fiji, the first such visit in three decades. In April, the Solomon Islands signed a security

agreement with Beijing, and Washington expressed concerns that China would open a base there. In July, Vice President Kamala Harris gave a virtual address at the PIF in which she announced plans to open new embassies, return the Peace Corps and increase funding to the Forum Fisheries Agency. Finally, in September, President Biden hosted the leaders of Pacific Island countries for a first-ever White House summit.

In May 2023, Biden canceled what would have been a much-anticipated historic first U.S. presidential visit to the region to deal with the debt-ceiling crisis, but invited the PIF countries back for a second White House summit later in the year. Blinken went to Papua New Guinea in Biden's place, and witnessed the signing of the third round of COFA funding with Palau. Micronesia signed the next day.

As the United States asserts itself more and more as a "Pacific nation" — as the Pacific Island national security strategy proclaimed — it raises the question of what exactly America is trying to achieve. "It's really important to step back as we start to use this term 'Pacific homeland' and ask, What's the intent of using it?" Walsh says. "What are we trying to communicate, and what are we trying to assert? The U.S. government often misrefers to the Freely Associated States as part of the American homeland. Are these mistakes or is there intent behind it?"

**From the bay,** the Marshall Islands' capital atoll, Majuro, shimmers low off the water. The patches of palm trees, a few tall buildings and a slim bridge rise above the placid aqua blue, as if balanced on nothing at all. The atoll is 10 feet above sea level and so narrow that from the fifth floor of one of the few multifloor buildings, I could see the ocean from both sides. More than 650 miles east of Micronesia, the Marshall

Islands — 29 atolls and five islands running in two almost-parallel chains halfway between Hawaii and Australia — presents a different kind of challenge to America's renewed effort for hearts and minds.

In the Marshall Islands, negotiations over the third Compact funding round continue because of disagreement over the legacy of U.S. nuclear testing and responsibilities related to it. During the Trusteeship period, the United States conducted so much nuclear testing over the atolls of Bikini and Enewetak that it was akin to 1.6 Hiroshima explosions every day for a dozen years. The "Castle Bravo" test was so big it could be seen from Okinawa; the ash settled on nearby populated atolls. The U.S. government later took the opportunity to study those that it resettled; "they are more like us than the mice," an official with the Atomic Energy Commission explained. Later, the United States took the radioactive waste from nuclear testing in the area, reportedly added 130 tons of soil from an irradiated Nevada nuclear testing site, and buried it in a giant dome on Enewetak. The dome is currently at risk of collapsing from rising sea levels. When the Marshallese government appealed for help to seal it, Washington refused.

The Marshall Islands is also home to one of the world's largest lagoons, Kwajalein atoll — which is itself a cautionary tale of participating in America's military ambitions. The Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site was formalized during the negotiations in the original Compact, when the U.S. military leased the land from traditional landowners. Kwajalein now supports U.S. missile and missile-defense testing, space launches and space surveillance. When the U.S. military wants to test whether a missile can fly from California to China or North Korea, they shoot it at Kwajalein. The entire island is a military zone, home to roughly 1,300 American military service members, contractors

and scientists and their families.

As a result of the base construction, Marshallese residents of Kwajalein were moved to a nearby island, Ebeye. Rounds of missile testing and live-fire training by U.S. troops caused the relocation of additional nearby atolls. More and more people were crammed onto Ebeye, which is now among the most densely populated places on Earth. Fifteen thousand people, half of whom are children, live on 80 acres — less than one-tenth the size of Central Park — with 20 to 30 family members sharing a single house. Chewy Lin, a Taiwanese-Marshallese journalist who has spent time on Ebeye, told me of how, early into his visit there, he wondered why he saw so many teenagers walking around in the middle of the night. Lin thought they were just out having fun. “But I realized that’s not the issue; it’s that they take turns to sleep.”

Roughly a thousand Marshallese work on Kwajalein. Every morning, they crowd onto a barge that takes them there and then back in the evening. On the base, Marshallese laborers do menial work; they complain of poor treatment by on-base security as they come on and off, subjected to dehumanizing searches and questioning about themselves and their personal items. David Paul, a senator representing Kwajalein, told me how a guard once asked to inspect his water bottle, eyeing him with suspicion for smuggling he didn’t even know what — alcohol? explosive substances? — onto the base. “They think that we’re in Kabul or Baghdad or any other very challenging region of the world, but we’re in the Marshall Islands,” Paul said. “We’re being treated like we’re the enemy rather than friends and close partners.”

I asked Paul if, after all these decades, he felt the deal, negotiated between America and its ward, to lease their island for target practice was really fair. “Can it improve?” he said. “Of course. What is really the



true value of them using the Marshall Islands for missile-testing programs to advance national security — for the United States to remain the monolithic superpower — compared to what the locals are getting in exchange for their land?"

**One afternoon in** Saipan, I went out on a traditional Chamorro canoe — an outrigger with a sail, a hull for the navigators and a plank over the crossbeams for the passengers — steered by one navigator and two voyagers from [500 Sails](#), an NGO that is reviving maritime traditions of the Mariana Islands. The ocean was clear and quiet, the waves barely discernible in the silence. Someone spotted a sea turtle.

From afar, we could see the Imperial Pacific hotel and casino jutting out of the trees. The Imperial is by far the biggest structure on Saipan; the white marble rimmed with gold ornaments looks as if it fell from another dimension next to the downtown district's squat cement buildings. Golden dolphins dance atop fountains at the entrance, while eggs the size of cars stand under gilded suspended dragons in the hall below. Part of a 2014 \$7 billion development by a Chinese-owned company, at its peak the operation was somehow turning over more per-table bets than any casino in Las Vegas or Macau. In 2020, federal prosecutors opened charges against the company for employing undocumented workers, illegal money transfers and criminal conspiracy. The company owes at least \$100 million in taxes and regulatory fees. Today the casino stands empty, its future murky. Residents told me they don't think the government has enough money to deconstruct it safely.

On the other side of us, farther out at sea, past the reef that rings the sandy bay, loomed three gargantuan American merchant-marine ships full of war supplies. They can be seen from every point on the western side of the island. From the canoe, the picture emerging across the

impoverished region seemed almost cartoonish; no matter their status, the Pacific Islands were essentially trapped — forced to choose between Chinese casinos and the U.S. military.

On my six-week trip around the Pacific, none of the political alliances I saw seemed to serve the local people on whose behalf they supposedly had been crafted. There did not seem to be a clear strategy of regional development, and in the steady drumbeat toward war, the basic tenets of democracy in the Pacific continued fraying, contributing to a legacy of broken promises and distrust. What made it worse was not simply a lack of solutions to their problems, but the metropole's ignorance of the existence of the problem itself.

Debate over the exploitative nature of America's founding history and the country's behavior overseas are now frequent in the U.S. public discourse, but there is no mention of Guam and the vestiges of American empire that continue in the Pacific. Biden's new Pacific Strategy claimed to be built to defend sovereignty and freedom, yet its fulcrum was the least enfranchised place in the nation.

"The 'free and open Indo-Pacific' is like this new paradigmatic shift against China," Kenneth Gofigan Kuper, a professor of political science at the University of Guam, told me. "All geopolitical roads in this region lead to Guam — we're the Rome of the Pacific. We are the price of a 'free and open Pacific,' but Guam is not free."

In two referendums in 1982, the people of Guam voted to become a U.S. commonwealth — like the Northern Marianas — but legislation to change the status stalled in Congress. In 1997, the Guam Legislature passed a law that established the Guam Commission on Decolonization and called for another plebiscite. The choices were: statehood,

independence or free association. Voting was restricted to the “Chamorro people,” who were defined as “all inhabitants of Guam in 1898 and their descendants.” (“Chamorro” is the spelling Guam adhered to before 2018.) Three years later, the plebiscite law was amended to replace “Chamorro” with “native inhabitants of Guam” to avoid accusations of racial discrimination. But in 2017, the Ninth District court ruled that since the new law referred to a statute that had previously stated “Chamorro,” it still violated the 15th Amendment, and struck down the law. The Supreme Court refused to hear the case.

The question of who would vote in the plebiscite was complicated, and how it was phrased was contentious. Over centuries of migration, the CHamoru have become a minority on the island. In the [2020 census](#), 36 percent of the population identified as Asian alone, with 29 percent of self-identifying as Filipino. There were also debates as to whether any of the options on the ballot were truly realistic — was Guam technically too small to be a state, too entwined with the United States to be freely associated and too reliant on American passports to be independent? Would they lose their security or gain a say over it?

Still, the circuit court’s rejection of Guam’s appeal in 2019 inspired the largest public protest on the island in recent memory. It also left Guam’s government nervous about trying again — Democratic legislators want to ensure any new law is unassailable before announcing it. But no matter how and which way people believe the status discussion should be decided, there is an overall acknowledgment that colonialism is an anachronism — that territorial status should be modernized.

“The absolute, immense power that Congress has in the instance of the Insular Cases is unfair, unconstitutional and un-American, but on the other hand, it gives them immense power to create a different

relationship with an entity like Guam," Robert Underwood, Guam's representative in the House from 1993 to 2003, told me. "That could be independence, free association or, if arranged in a certain way, it could be unique legislation just for Guam."

This year is the 125th anniversary of the founding of the American Insular Empire, including Guam and Puerto Rico. "When you think about other empires — the British, the French, the Spanish empires — colonies are part of the national identity, this acceptance that 'We have an empire, we have colonies,'" Bevacqua, the museum curator and historian, said. "The United States, despite all that it's done, lacks that basic ability on a national level to acknowledge the colonies problem. Normally it's just all these piecemeal attempts to deal with the colonies by bringing them in closer to the United States, and that's part of the problem. Colonizers that are so self-assured of their greatness only think of fixing problems by giving more of themselves."

When I first started reading about Guam, I imagined the solution was enfranchisement, voting rights, equal opportunity under the law, statehood: more so-called American ideals. The reality was significantly more complicated. But more mortifying was that I simply hadn't known any of these debates were happening in the first place.

"I refer to Guam as America's best-kept secret," Natividad, the social-work professor, told me. "We're just known as being the U.S. military's outpost in the Pacific. Even though there's been thousands of U.S. military troops who have been stationed here, that have rotated for a century. You would think, How could they not know? But the reality is we're just not a part of the gestalt of the American mind. That goes deep. When I talk about our colonized mind, there's also something about being the colonizer. The solution is not to give me the right to

vote for president, I don't want it; I want us to exercise our right to decolonization, to self-determination that is due to us and recognized in the international courts by the U.S. signing on to the U.N. Charter. That's what I want. Don't give me any more bones if you're not going to give us freedom."

**When we first** met, Roy Gamboa invited me to see his family's land. He was a veteran with base access, and I was a U.S. citizen; given that he had brought visitors on before, we both thought it would not be a problem. But when he called the public-affairs office of Naval Base Guam to try to bring me in, no one returned his messages. It took nearly two weeks to get us onto the base together and involved appeals that went all the way up to the public-affairs office for Joint Region Marianas Commander Nicholson. When we did receive permission to visit the old cemetery in Sumay, where he had come so freely as a child, a public-affairs officer would have to escort me in her vehicle during our entire trip.

The base-visiting system on Guam is an impenetrable labyrinth. Each base is under the control of a different commander, who sets different regulations on who can come inside and how. During my time on the island, I visited all of the large bases run by different branches or subservices — Andersen Air Force Base, Naval Base Guam and Marine Corps Base Camp Blaz. I also saw the THAAD missile-defense battery operated and controlled by the Army, but to make matters more confusing, I was escorted there by a public-affairs officer from the Air Force. The THAAD also happens to be a place where the Guam National Armed Guard is on active duty. (If you're confused about who is in charge of what, so are they.)

Leevin T. Camacho, Guam's outgoing attorney general, took me

through Andersen Air Force Base to visit his family's land. There are about a dozen family plots inside Andersen, so, somewhat confusingly, CHamoru families could still visit their tracts, but because they were inside the base and therefore not connected to power or sewage, they could not live on them. As we stood in line in the equatorial sun to get into the small visitor building, we chatted with an older veteran with a cane waiting with his wife. They had to renew her visitor pass every three days — anytime they wanted to get gas, go to the grocery store or eat at the reduced-price chains. After an hour in the heat, we were the second-to-last visitors let into the checkpoint before they closed for the day at 2 p.m. The 20 people who had been standing and sweating behind us had to come back again tomorrow. Inside, a harried young airman muttered frantically, reminding herself of the steps she had to complete to process everyone in line. I wrote my Social Security number on a plastic card for a background check and left my fingerprint in some kind of electronic system. After over an hour and a half of waiting, we were allowed to get into Camacho's car and go to his family's land.

Naval Base Guam was significantly easier to get onto, paradoxically because unescorted visitors were not allowed at all. The P.A.O. drove me through the armed checkpoint without any problems. We pulled up to a small, neat cemetery, all that remains of the largest historic CHamoru village pre-contact, where we waited for Roy to arrive.

There was an eeriness to it, being on a large geopolitical target that resembled a tropical paradise in the middle of the Pacific — a sense of foreboding that was both ever-present and yet somehow totally absent. Many people I spoke to, including Roy, had friends who relocated to the continental United States just because of the danger of a North Korean

or Chinese nuclear-missile strike. "I'm not ashamed to say I think of it once in a while," Roy had told me. "OK, if a nuke hit, there really is nothing anybody can do. Guam is about 30 miles long. If you don't get hit in the blast, there's the fallout."

When we were finally able to sit down together to talk about status, Roy told me he had thought a lot about it and elaborated that he believed the plebiscite should happen and, as all the CHamoru I spoke to told me, only those with CHamoru lineage should vote. "We have a huge target on our back," he told me, "and that's because of who we affiliate ourselves with, who's in charge of our land and being the largest gas station, largest supply line in the Pacific."

I asked, "Do you know how you would vote?"

"Independence," he said. "I'm comfortable saying independence, because at least we have a voice, and we have the right to sit at the table to negotiate what our future as a people will be," he explained. "Status quo can't be an option; leaving it as it is means we still leave the control in somebody else's hands." He thought Guam had the resources and the intellect to decide its own future, that the globalized world meant there could be more jobs and remote work on the island. They could sign a military basing agreement if they chose to; Uncle Sam could stay but on equal terms. They would do better balancing their own needs and putting their own people first, something they had not had a chance to do for 350 years.

When he first got out of the service, Roy wanted to buy a house in North Carolina. He loved it out there, it was beautiful, and by his calculations, the cost of living was half of what it was on Guam. He could have lived there and not worried about so many things, but his

parents were on the island. "The one thing about Guam is family is everything," he told me. "So a lot of families are torn when they have to relocate for better opportunities. I choose to stay here because this is where I want my kids to grow up, in this culture. I want them to know what it's like to be CHamoru."

As we talked it over, it seemed perhaps Roy had always felt some version of this but had never sat down to think that hard about it. No one had ever asked him to. Outsiders had always written Guam's history. Roy and his children had been taught with textbooks from the continental United States — from which their own culture, community and status were absent. The first textbooks to be written by CHamoru, centering their own people and explaining Guam's history and colonization, would be published next year. "People in my generation have only known this way of life — there's a continued lack of interest," he said. "But if it was a required course in high school, maybe things might change over the next 15, 20 years."

Standing at the shores of the little bay, Roy pointed out the skipjacks, still flipping. His grandmother was born here, on this earth. She was a year old when the Japanese invaded, and lived with traces of what Roy identified as PTSD for the rest of her life. His grandfather held on to their land for as long as he could. But as they got older, the naval base simply became more established. Contractors were hired to do sporadic landscaping. The man and the boy still came every weekend to cut the grass, and sometimes his grandfather would try to plant seedlings, but eventually contractors would mow them down. As time went on, the grass was cut so regularly, there was nothing left for Roy and his grandfather to tend to, so they would pick fruit. Other times, they would come just to visit with the land. "And then, over time, my



grandfather just stopped coming on. I guess as he got older, he started to figure, you know, we're probably never going to get the land back."

Roy hasn't told Roy Jr. about their land; something about having that conversation with his son was too hard. "It was disheartening for me to go through all of that stuff. I didn't want to pass that down to him knowing that the situation that Guam is in," Roy explained. "While my grandfather was hopeful, I've learned to deal with it. I've taken him to different places on the base to go look at the monuments, but never mentioned to him the land that we used to own. It's giving him false hope."

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