

'A Journey That Has No Ending'

Most Americans have never even heard of the Compact of Free Association, but that may change as federal aid runs out, raising urgent questions about our moral, financial and legal responsibility to Micronesians.

OCTOBER 15, 2015 • BY CHAD BLAIR

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A nuclear test at Bikini Atoll in 1946. Photo courtesy of U.S. Department of Defense



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One Sunday in February 1946, as the devoutly Christian residents of Bikini Atoll left their open-air, thatched-roof church, they were greeted by U.S. Commodore Ben H. Wyatt, the military governor of the Marshall Islands.

Wyatt, a soft-spoken Kentucky native and “pint-sized end” for the Navy’s football team, had traveled to Bikini on a seaplane from Kwajalein, a U.S. military base in the area, to ask for the Bikinians’ cooperation. Would they be willing, he asked, to temporarily leave their picturesque atoll so the U.S. could test some atomic bombs?

Areas in both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans had been considered, but Bikini had emerged as the ideal location: a protected anchorage 300 miles or more from urban areas but less than 1,000 miles from a base for B-29 bombers. The 3.4-square-mile atoll was deemed free of violent storms and enjoyed predictable currents that avoided fishing areas, steamer lanes and inhabited shores.



VIEW LARGER MAP

Bikini Atoll, a chain of islands (in green) connected by a reef, was selected by the U.S. government for nuclear testing beginning in 1946.

Through the testing, the U.S. would be able to determine the effects of the bombs

through the testing, the U.S. would be able to determine the effects of the bombs on ships, installations and equipment, and allow for training in the event of a nuclear attack.

The testing was necessary, [Wyatt told the Bikinians](#), “for the good of mankind and to end all world wars.”

The Bikinians were no strangers to war. As historian David Hanlon pointed out in [his 1998 book](#) “Remaking Micronesia,” the Micronesian islands are among the “most peripheral of peripheries” and yet “at the center of several of the more historically prominent events” of the 20th century.

Beginning in the first world war, Japan seized much of Micronesia from German occupiers. Japan then controlled the region under a League of Nations mandate and began fortifying many of the islands in the 1930s in preparation for another war.

After the Pearl Harbor attack in Hawaii in 1941, the U.S. fought to take the region back from Japan, island by bloody island, and by the time the war was over, Micronesia was under American control.

But the United States remained in a defensive posture in 1946. In fact, President Harry Truman had already approved Bikini as a test site before Wyatt arrived to ask for permission.

There was a discussion among the Bikinians that day, but in reality they had little control over the situation. Only a few hours after Wyatt arrived, Juda, the king of Bikini, told him, “We will go believing that everything is in the hands of God.”



A display at the Harry S. Truman Library and Museum in Independence, Missouri, chronicles the Hiroshima bombing of Aug. 6, 1945.

It was the beginning of what would become decades of out-migration for the Marshallese.

Within months, the 167 residents of Bikini were displaced to a smaller, uninhabited atoll, and on July 1, 1946, the fourth nuclear bomb in history was dropped on Bikini as part of the Able test of Operation Crossroads. Able was 50 percent more powerful than Little Boy, the atomic bomb that devastated Hiroshima in 1945.

News of the test spread quickly around the world, which was part of the point.

Vice Admiral W.H.P. Blandy told President Harry S. Truman that representatives from the press should have “equal opportunity for access to unclassified matter concerning these tests.”





Beginning in the 1940s, Americans feared a nuclear war with the Soviet Union. The government distributed material to prepare the country.

America wanted the world to know what it was capable of, and the propaganda worked.

French designer Louis Réard was so impressed with the shock and awe that the test elicited, he named his new, scandalous two-piece swimsuit after the tropical atoll.

Comedian Bob Hope quipped that, "As soon as the war ended, we located the one spot on earth that hadn't been touched by war and blew it to hell."

And we didn't stop there.

From 1946 to 1958, 67 separate nuclear weapons were exploded in the Marshall Islands. The largest test, code named Bravo and part of Operation Castle, was a surface detonation of a hydrogen bomb that was over 1,000 times more powerful than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

Bikinians, by and large, haven't returned to their homeland since.

The Compact Of Free Association

Today, while Micronesia is still on the periphery for most Americans, it is central to U.S. defense.

Following World War II, the United Nations established the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, essentially giving the U.S. responsibility for the region, including more than 2,000 islands spread out across 2 million square miles of ocean.

In 1986, the U.S. entered a more formal agreement, called the Compact of Free Association, with two newly formed independent countries: the [Federated States of Micronesia](#) and the [Republic of the Marshall Islands](#). Another new independent nation, the [Republic of Palau](#), was added in 1994.

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A trailer home on the lagoon side of Majuro Atoll in the Marshall Islands. Many Micronesians are proud of their relationship with the U.S.

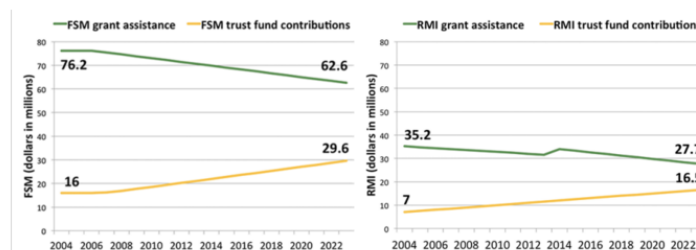
The compact was the natural progression of a series of small compensation payments by the U.S. to those Marshallese impacted directly by the nuclear tests. The payments, most of them for personal injuries and property damage, eventually totaled \$270 million. The U.S. also established a Nuclear Claims Tribunal and funded a nationwide radiological study.

The money was deemed “full and final” compensation for America’s nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands unless “changed circumstances” demonstrate that the compensation was “manifestly inadequate.”

The agreement also allows for a special relationship between the U.S. and the COFA nations. The U.S. maintains exclusive strategic control over all three nations, including their vast expanse of ocean just north of the equator, about 2,400 miles southwest of Hawaii and about 2,400 miles southeast of Japan.

In return, the U.S. provides financial assistance to the three nations beyond the nuclear compensation to the Marshallese. From 1987 to 2003, the Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of the Marshall Islands received a combined \$2.1 billion in federal assistance. In 2004, the last time Congress approved amended compacts with those nations, it said the U.S. would provide \$3.6 billion in assistance over the next 20 years — roughly \$200 million per year, ending in 2023.

U.S. Assistance to the Federated States of Micronesia, Republic of the Marshall Islands



Source: U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2013. [Click chart to enlarge.](#)

Palau, which has about 20,000 citizens — less than one-third the population of the Marshalls and about one-fifth the population of the Federated States — received more than \$850 million from 1994 to 2009. But Congress has not renewed funding for Palau since funding expired in 2009. The U.S. Department of the Interior has asked Congress for \$150 million for Palau in its 2016 budget request to fulfill and implement the U.S.’ total obligation for continued economic assistance to Palau through 2024

It’s hard to understate how important these federal payments have become to the COFA nations, especially the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia, which have weaker economies than Palau.

But for many, the most important element of the Compact is the section that allows Micronesians who emigrate from the COFA nations to live and work indefinitely in the United States and its territories, like Guam.



Mark Edward Harris/Civil Beat

Girls on a rusting vehicle on the island of Weno in Chuuk. The island state is very poor and heavily dependent on U.S. financial aid.

COFA citizens are exempt from meeting American visa and labor certification requirements that apply to other visitors.

As a result, it's estimated that there may be as many as 75,000 immigrants from COFA nations living in the U.S. and its territories.

While that may seem like a drop in the bucket compared to the more than 12 million illegal immigrants in the U.S., consider it from Micronesia's perspective: By some estimates, at least one-third of the citizens of the Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of the Marshall Islands live in the U.S. and its territories, and for myriad reasons, many more are expected to join them.

Their presence is most notable in Guam and Hawaii, where health, education and social services are often strained by the large influx.

Ironically, large out-migration and the impact on social welfare in the states were not envisioned when the Compact formed. The expectation, according to those involved in the negotiations, was that some Micronesians would go abroad for education and then return to help their home islands.

Instead, the underprivileged islanders have migrated in large numbers, and many come in need of help.

First Stop, Guam

"For me, personally," Eddie Calvo, the governor of Guam, told government leaders

SECTIONS

1. The Compact Of Free

For me, personally, Eddie Calvo, the governor of Guam, told government leaders in Washington, D.C., last February, "it hit home pretty hard a few weeks ago when a lifeless body was found just across the street from the governor's complex."

Calvo was speaking at a meeting of the Interagency Group on Insular Areas, part of the U.S. Interior Department. Guests included Obama administration officials and representatives from U.S. island territories, but the city had been blanketed by snowfall the night before and the tropical islands of Hawaii and Guam seemed a world away.

Calvo, who oozes so much charm that he would not be out of place hustling for ward votes as a Chicago alderman, was trying to reach the government officials by putting into human terms the impact a huge influx of Micronesians has had on Guam.

The body he'd seen was that of a COFA migrant who'd had health problems and relied on a nearby water faucet and restroom for comfort.



Guam Governor Eddie Calvo warns that his island is at "a breaking point" due to unfettered Micronesian immigration.

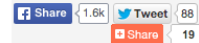


LISTEN Kosme Sos, a Eucharist minister in training to become a deacon, says Micronesians contribute to their new homes. At left is Father Francis X. Hezel, at the Parish of Santa Barbara, Guam.

"Twenty years ago you would not see a situation like this in Guam," said Calvo. "Any island community understands the importance of extended family and clan."

Association

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This is a human tragedy."

It is also a matter of U.S. government policy, Calvo made clear — one he strongly implied needs a major overhaul.

For Guam — a U.S. territory which is geographically part of Micronesia, but ethnically different — COFA has caused the number of new arrivals to balloon by more than 340 percent since 1993. Many have come from the state of Chuuk in the Federated States of Micronesia, which is about an hour away by airplane.

There are now an estimated 20,000 Micronesians living in Guam, or about 12 percent of the island's population. The cost to help the migrants with health, education and social services has been about \$1 billion over the past 30 years; in 2014 alone, costs to Guam totaled \$144 million.



A Chuukese service at Parish of Santa Barbara, Dededo, Guam. The island government has spent more than \$1 billion on health and social services for Micronesian immigrants in the past 30 years.

To help them absorb health, education and social services costs due to COFA migration, Guam, Hawaii and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (small islands located near Guam with a much smaller COFA population) receive "Compact-Impact Aid" from the federal government, but Calvo said it was nowhere near enough.

Last year, Guam received just \$16 million, while facilities like Guam Memorial Hospital, he said, are swamped by Micronesians without health insurance who use the emergency room as a clinic. The visits contributed to \$30 million in unpaid bills last year.

Calvo warned that the island is at "a breaking point," saying that, "My concern is, what happens if we don't get federal help? We're already in a bad spot."

right now, it will magnify tenfold in future years if we don't get a handle on this."

2023 Looms Large

The situation, many say, is guaranteed to get more urgent.

Unless the Compact is amended, the U.S. funding stream is decreasing and will largely expire in 2023, most likely expediting COFA residents' mass exodus to America.

Trust funds were established for the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia in 2003. The interest from the funds is supposed to supplant federal payments to the nations in 2023, but the funds took a hit during the global financial crisis of 2008, and there are widely shared concerns that the money will be woefully inadequate to support the needs of the two nations.

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Mark Edward Harris/Civil Beat

An abandoned vehicle on the causeway near Ebeye in Kwajalein Atoll.

The government of the Marshall Islands announced last week it had just dumped another \$650,000 into its trust fund. That along with a U.S. government contribution in 2015 of \$14.5 million and another \$2.4 million from Taiwan brings the total in the Marshall Islands fund to more than \$240 million, the Marshalls government reported.

While federal money has gone primarily to education and health services in the COFA nations, it's not always immediately obvious what there is to show for it — at least by Western standards.

Bathrooms at Chuuk High School, for instance, resemble dark, dank caves. The facilities are so inadequate that the school, which doesn't have a lunch program, dismisses the majority of its students at 12:30 p.m.

On Ebeye in the Marshall Islands, a broken school bus sits rusting on the campus of an elementary school while another, abandoned along the island's narrow causeway, sits covered in vegetation.



Mark Edward Harris/Civil Beat



Principal Paul Hadik, center, with students on the Chuuk High School campus. School administrators make do with the limited resources they have.

Abandoned structures dot the flat, lush landscape — indicative, perhaps, of a [2013 audit](#) by the U.S. Government Accountability Office that warned of significant risks of fraud, waste and abuse of the Compact monies in the Federated States and the Marshall Islands.

Accounting and oversight, the nations themselves admit, has been hit or miss.

John Ehsa, the governor of Pohnpei, says that the Federated States of Micronesia had a steep learning curve when it came to proper accounting procedures.

"They look down on us," he says of the federal government. "We did not know accounting before, but now we have good audit reports. There is mistrust."

"The resentment in Guam and Hawaii is valid," Ehsa said of the hit U.S. and Guam taxpayers are taking from COFA migration. "They were not part of the beginning (of COFA). They were innocent victims, they got the brunt of the Compact impact."

But it's also questionable who is benefiting from the Compact.

There are still chronic social and economic problems both in the COFA nations and the American communities they migrate to. Many immigrants are still struggling to find jobs and prosperity in their adopted homelands, whether Hawaii, Guam or some communities on the mainland.



Much of the population of Ebeye in the Marshalls is under 18 years of age.

"Right now, it's poverty, it's quality of life issues, it's health and education and employment opportunity," Esther Kiaaina, U.S. Interior Assistant Secretary for Insular Areas, says of the immigrant experience.

Because the economies of Micronesia have become especially dependent on American largesse, many say the nations simply won't be able to survive without continued federal support.

But Kiaaina says Congress isn't likely to continue direct aid beyond 2023.

The reason in part, she says, is that budgetary constraints and funding offsets in the U.S. has meant political leaders have struggled to fulfill Palau's part of the Compact agreement, even though Palau is a model nation when it comes to conserving natural resources and sustaining an economy driven by tourism.

She also says the problems detailed in government reports about financial accounting "will raise red flags all across Washington, D.C."

Michael J. Levin, a demographer who has conducted surveys in Micronesia and on Micronesian migrations, is more optimistic. He believes the compact will be amended, pointing to the simple fact that it has happened once before.



Hard at work at an elementary and middle school on Pohnpei.

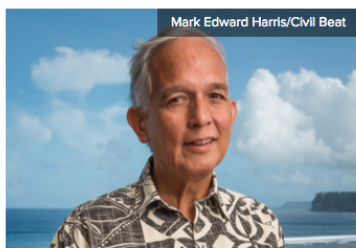
"It's not the American way to let people starve," he says. "If you just cut off aid, people are going to start dying. Does the U.S. really want to be seen as the country that is letting all these people die? It's a humanitarian thing."

But for others, including Robert Underwood, Guam's former representative in Congress and the current president of the University of Guam, the treaty, with its negative impact on Guam and Hawaii especially, has run its course.

The Federated States and the Marshalls, he says, "don't want to deal with their own issues," relying too much on the COFA funds and using the migration option as a "safety valve."

Underwood even goes one step further, calling into question the policy of unfettered migration rights.

"The issue is, 'Do people have a right to unrestricted migration?' I don't think they do," he says. "They just end up being a permanent population with no particular status. They are not permanent residents."



Regardless of what happens with COFA funding in 2023, however, American defensive control of the COFA nations will remain in place.

The U.S. military maintains a strong presence in the region — a military base for missile testing and space-



University of Guam President Robert Underwood.

tracking activities on Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands. From 1,000 to 1,500 U.S. troops and defense workers work on the atoll, which the U.S. rents from the Marshallese for about \$16

million a year.

That agreement will continue until at least 2066, and as American military, political and economic interests “pivot” to the Pacific, control of such an expansive buffer zone in the Pacific appears increasingly valuable.

A Moral Obligation?

It's difficult to separate America's military presence in Micronesia from the nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands. For many, the U.S.'s obligation — moral and financial — to support the COFA nations starts in Bikini, where the massive out-migration began.



At home on Ebeye.

[It's an emotional response.](#)

[After all](#), the nuclear testing directly affected about 2,000 people on four atolls in the Marshall Islands, while the COFA agreement encompasses some 250,000 people from three nations. But it's still a powerful one.

“The U.S. has to come to terms that we did things out there that were pretty bad,” says Richard Creagan, a former Peace Corps volunteer in the Marshall Islands who's now a Hawaii state lawmaker. “We've got to man up out there and take care of them.”

If we don't, Creagan says, “they will keep coming.”

For Jellesen Rubon-Chutaro, a Marshallese woman who coordinates health-care outreach efforts in northwest Arkansas — which along with nearby cities in Oklahoma and Missouri is home to more than 12,000 Marshallese — simply having to ask the federal government for more money is insulting.

“You know what you did,” Rubon-Chutaro says of the U.S., “and you should know what you should do back for us. We shouldn't have to come and beg for it.”

That, by and large, was the conclusion of a 2012 United Nations report, which stated that test survivors feel like nomads in their own country and that it is understandable why the Marshallese still fear for their health.

“The nuclear testing and the experiments have left a legacy of distrust in the hearts and minds of the Marshallese,” [the U.N. report concluded](#). “The deep fissure in the relationship between (the Marshalls and the U.S.) presents significant challenges; nonetheless the opportunity for reconciliation and progress, for the benefit of all Marshallese, is there to be taken.”

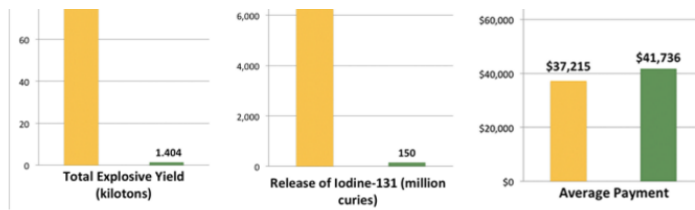
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Nevada and Marshall Islands Testing and Compensation





Source: Harvard Law Student Advocates for Human Rights, 2006. Click to enlarge.

The report recommended that the U.S. pay \$2.3 billion in compensation for nuclear testing, that it declassify all secret reports on the testing and that the Marshall Islands sponsor an independent radiological survey of the entire region with the help of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

In response, the U.S. delegate in Geneva acknowledged the “negative effects” of the testing but said the U.S. [had already acted](#) on its responsibility to the Marshallese through the 1986 COFA treaty.

For Bill Graham, a former Peace Corps worker who is married to a Marshallese woman, that response speaks volumes about the U.S.’s position toward the Marshalls. He points to what Commodore Wyatt told the Bikinians when asking them to abandon their homes.



Nuclear Claims Tribunal Advocate Bill Graham on Majuro.

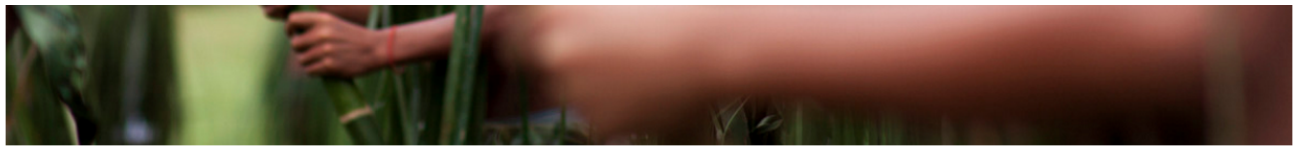
It was for the good of mankind, Wyatt had said, but, “What is our strategy for the ‘good of mankind’” now, Graham asks. “That is a pretty big quote, and that is where the whole experience begins.”

‘A Journey That Has No Ending’

The vast majority of Bikinians today have never even laid eyes on the atoll, and for most, Bikini remains a mythical and idyllic place.

“Everyone describes their islands as gifts of God,” Jack Niedenthal, who published [a 2001 history](#) of Bikini and is married to a Bikinian, says. “They’re something that is passed along from ancestors.”





A traditional stick dance is performed at Sansrik Elementary School in Lelu, Kosrae.

Alson Kelen is a Bikinian who was born on Ebeye, which is part of Kwajalein atoll. Returning to Bikini was always his family's goal.

"In 1968 the U.S. government said it was clear to go back to Bikini, and (my family) really wanted to go back," says Kelen, now in his 40s.

His grandfather moved the family back to Bikini in the 1970s and Kelen spent four years there himself, but radiation levels were soon determined to be too dangerous, forcing the family to move again.



LISTEN Alson Kelen, who leads the Canoes of the Marshall Islands program on Majuro, says it is too soon to stop U.S. aid to his islands.

To this day, Bikini soil is contaminated with cesium-137 radioactive isotopes. Though Bikini has an elected mayor to represent its people, no one lives on the contaminated atoll. The Bikini town hall is located on Majuro, hundreds of miles away.

"Juda (the king) said Bikini belongs to us," Niedenthal said, "the cesium belongs to the United States and they should come back and get it. We want the island the way it was back in 1946."

But Kelen, who served a term as Bikini mayor, knows that's a fantasy.

"Maybe 90 or 95 percent never been to Bikini," Kelen says of his compatriots.

"They've heard about it, they know that's where they are from. But it's a paradise in a fairy tale. It's a journey that has no ending."





WATCH SLIDESHOW

Chuuk is one of the poorest states in Micronesia, and has a high rate of out-migration.



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