

From the Kwajalein Missile Range to Fiji: The Military, Money and Misery in Paradise

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On October 2007 I peered from a window of a Boeing 737 approaching Kwajalein Atoll in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), pulled out my professional camera and began snapping photos of the enormous bay which serves as a missile range for the US star wars program. Kwaj island is rimmed by rotting metal pieces (whatever they are), dotted with huge radar installations, missile interceptors and who the hell knows what else?



Map showing Micronesia and Marshall Islands

After landing, I was taken to the military checkpoint. My hand luggage had to be left on the floor; a dog sniffed at it; a policewoman explained security regulations; outrageous military propaganda posters decorated the walls. The small and humble immigration checkpoint of the Marshall Islands was humbly

stuck in a corner of the room. I had a hard time explaining that I was actually traveling to Ebeye, a small island 4 miles away, a place that provides cheap labor to the US military base, a place of misery - an over-populated and desperate byway of the Marshall Islands.



Immigration checkpoint, Marshall Islands

Finally I was taken by police escort through the island to the docks, where I had to go through yet another security clearance, until I was ejected from the military base of my adopted country back to Marshall Islands territory, where I was already expected by people from the local government who had been informed about my arrival by two rebellious RMI senators and friends - Tony Debrum and Mike Kabua.

The Marshall Islands, like Japan, experienced atomic explosions on Bikini Atoll, as well nuclear contamination. Entire islands had to be evacuated, people died and are dying still today. They have to sue for compensation, even for adequate medical care. Others had to be

evacuated from Kwajalein Atoll when the US began building its star wars facilities.

What is really happening on Kwaj? Long-range missiles are tested. Launched from California's Vandenberg Air Force Base, they fly over 6,000 miles, then are shot down by interceptors based on Meck Island. Some missiles are simply allowed to fall into the bay, the enormous atoll lagoon the target.



Minuteman III ICBM blasts off from Vandenberg Air Force Base heading for the Ronald Reagan test site off Kwajalein on February 7, 2007

After signing a "defense treaty" with the US, the Marshall Islands became fully dependent on the aid. That led to the terrible culture of dependency and to one entirely wasted

generation, something that can't be described by any other term than "neo-colonialism."

In the meantime, the people on Ebeye have no running water. They are experiencing blackouts. Their traditional diet disappeared and they are now fully dependent on "Spam" corn beef, bacon, and junk food. A great number of inhabitants have diabetes. Preventive medicine is almost unknown and even those who are diagnosed with diabetic conditions continue with their previous lifestyle and diet. As a result, the number of amputees is shocking.



Ebeye dwellings



Ebeye vehicle for two

Ebeye is more crowded than Hong Kong and the island is dotted with the garbage dumps and pitiful carton shacks. Traditional culture has disappeared. Television sets beam military

programs from Kwaj. Many Marshallese joined the US army, out of desperation or simply from boredom. A number of them are fighting in Iraq.



Children of Ebeye and garbage

The US military pays rent, but the money goes directly to the landowners; some of them became extremely rich and moved to the United States. Checks that used to be cashed in the Marshall Islands are now deposited in banks overseas. While a few Marshallese enjoy the high life, the vast majority live in desperate conditions. Many of those who remember the Japanese occupation claim that even then life was easier and had more dignity than during this "American era."



Ebeye-no running water

I talked to simple folks and government people, to Philippine migrant workers and to the

children of Ebeye. Taking more than 1,000 images, I did as much as I could to document the plight of this desperate island.

On the speedboat back to Kwajalein I felt sick to my stomach. I didn't sleep for almost 3 nights as my A/C broke down during the first night and my bed was invaded by a combat platoon of suspiciously corpulent cockroaches. There was no water in my hotel - supposedly the best on the island. No towels. The carpet was stained by betel nut spit, or maybe it was blood? Still, I was fortunate. I had cash. I ate in the diner that had disgusting, but at least semi-hygienic food. Every morning, a dilapidated truck of the local government came to pick me up and show me around. I had arrived here by my own choice and my equipment bag hid Continental Micronesia tickets to Guam and from there to Tokyo, so I had no right to complain. Compared to everyone else I was a lucky bloke!

For the day of departure I was told that I had to present myself to the checkpoint at least 4 hours before my flight. I took the speed ferry to Kwajalein, went through security, got picked up by police and was escorted through the military base to the airport. An unfriendly Continental clerk checked me in. After that she informed me that the plane was several hours late - "It didn't even leave Honolulu yet." Fine, I said: feed me; take me to some restaurant.... "Oh no," she replied. "You can't stay on the base. You have to get off the island!"

I replied that I am a US citizen, that this is a US territory, and that's where I am going to wait for my plane. But she was unyielding. "Do you mean that I have to go abroad?" I asked sarcastically. She only nodded, a grave expression on her face.

"If that's how you look at it ..." she said.

Back to the police car, back to the checkpoint, to the ferry, to RMI.

And then it hit me: nobody complained. Weren't Americans known, even famous, for complaining loudly? Weren't we complaining, just a decade ago, about nearly everything? Weren't we raising hell when the plane was late or when the flight was overbooked? Not anymore. Passengers stranded at the airport were smiling servile, submissive smiles.

Then this subversive line of thought took me even further. "Hell," I thought, "I never read a novel, not even a short story, about the plight of the people on Ebeye Island. Our military sodomized the entire nation, nuked its people, relocated hundreds, turned the rest into submissive and dependant beings. Then it converted the biggest and one of the most beautiful atolls in the world into missile catchments, into some perverted and bizarre star wars saga. And nobody has read a single word about it! Nobody makes Borat-style films about them."



Star wars on Kwajalein

While the private contractors and military guys with their families enjoy the "cultural center" and craft shop on the base, while they play golf next to the runway, while their children have cute little playgrounds and beaches and benches to watch the sunset from, the people of the Marshall Islands are crammed like sardines on polluted and dirty Ebeye and elsewhere around the Kwaj Atoll, their feet and legs amputated because they can't get

adequate food and adequate treatment for their medical conditions as well as a decent education!



Ebeye still life

And while I was at it, I continued with this dangerous reasoning: "So what happened to our journalist traditions? Weren't our best novelists also brilliant journalists? Didn't fiction and nonfiction go hand in hand, complementing each other, inspiring each other? Where the hell are our novelists? Why don't they write about the Marshall Islands and Ebeye? Why don't they write in the mass media?"

At that point I began to worry about myself. "These thoughts are probably the result of dehydration and an acute lack of sleep," I thought. "Nobody asks such stupid questions in this day and age. Of course nobody writes about Kwaj and Ebeye. And of course no major publication will ask me to write or will allow me to write about this place."

I wandered around Ebeye, mad and tired, desperate. Five hours later I took the speedboat back to Kwaj, went through security, and was escorted to the airport again. Then, together with several other passengers I got locked in some hangar called a waiting room. Continental Micronesia didn't provide food or even water. There was no explanation and no apology. We had to take off our belts and shoes while going through security. "Can I keep on

my underwear?" I asked. "Sir?!" I heard the cold military bark.

When the plane finally arrived, I was still seven hours away from Guam as this was the famous "island hopper," stopping at all the airports of the Federated States of Micronesia that are on the way: Kozurai, Phonopei, Chuuk. I realized I would have only 3 hours of sleep before catching my Tokyo bound flight early in the morning.

To my surprise, the other passengers welcomed the arrival of the plane with loud cheers. No resistance, no revolution in the making. They reminded me of North Koreans welcoming the Dear Leader. Then I realized I had had enough. I suddenly yelled at my fellow passengers: "Why are you grinning like hyenas? Aren't you pissed off? Aren't we going to demand an explanation or compensation? Anything?!" There was dead silence. People were staring at me in horror. A security guard slowly approached. He was twice my size. "Do you have a problem?" he asked in a chilling voice.

"Yes," I said. "My plane is almost six hours late. I was kicked out, sent abroad to wait for it. I am hungry, thirsty and pissed off. And everybody looks like I deserve to be taken to Guantanamo Bay for saying it!" People watched me as if I were a suicide bomber.

I realized I had said something that was not supposed to be pronounced. Guantanamo Bay! Yes. Would Joseph Heller now be declared a terrorist for writing about Nately's bombing of his own airport? Would others be locked in the secret prisons in the Middle East or Eastern Europe for writing books that justify the struggle for justice? The real struggle for justice, not the dominant media lie. Can one end up in a concentration camp these days, or lose his or her citizenship, for speaking out about our military bases? Can one be screwed for declaring that we are taking advantage of defenseless people; and that our star wars

technologies are just expensive, counter-productive, immoral toys for private contractors and top military brass?

Is one still allowed to scream, to protest - to ridicule insanity? I looked at the guard and then at the passengers. I used to love America for its spirit of rebelliousness. Now I saw servility and compliance.

I was in the middle of a US high security military installation, surrounded by passengers who were, at least many of them, private contractors, working on the base. I was at least risking being denied boarding. But I couldn't do otherwise. "And I have another problem," I said. "I have a problem with this base, which should be closed down and returned to the people of Kwajalein."

And then... nothing! The security guard said nothing. The door finally opened, and Continental Micronesia staff invited us to board the plane. I was not arrested; nobody put a bullet through my brain. I boarded the plane and took off.

Then I saw the enormous beauty of Kwajalein Atoll below the wing.



And I was stunned. It was probably because I was so exhausted, so tired: but down below, on one of the small islands of the atoll I saw small

figures, holding hands, walking with no particular aim. They looked like characters from the Bergmann movie the "Seventh Seal." There was no Death at the back of the procession, but they looked unmistakable, so familiar and so heartbreaking. But they were not Bergmann's actors. Despite the distance, in horror, I began recognizing their faces: Huck Finn holding hands with old Jim, Nately and his whore and Yossarian from Heller's Catch-22 all in one group, and Robert Jordan, an American teacher who went to fight in Spain in the 1930s to defend the republic against fascism far from his native town across the Atlantic Ocean.. And so many others. And they were all waving: not in greeting, but they were waving good-bye toward the US plane which was taking me away from Kwaj to Guam. They were not waving at the plane itself, but at something else. And as they waved, once giants, once my heroes but suddenly so small and irrelevant, my glasses became foggy and for some reason I had to swallow very hard and turn my face away from the window as one does when one feels he is losing home.

In Guam, in the arrival hall, several photos of young Pacific Islanders - those who had recently died in Iraq - welcomed me.

"Welcome To Paradise!" says the Air Pacific flight hostess as the plane touches down at Nadi International Airport. From the moment you arrive, the word "paradise" will be repeated ad nauseum. It will scream from the advertising billboards, from the pages of glossy airline and tourist magazines and brochures. "Your own slice of paradise at bargain prices". "Invest in your luxury villa in Paradise". "Dine in Paradise". "Swim in Paradise". "Honeymoon in Paradise."



The serene charm of luxury in Fiji

Just a few miles from the center of the second largest Fijian city - Lautoka - child scavengers are working in the middle of an enormous garbage dump, trying to make a living by separating filthy objects of at least some commercial value. They are surrounded by appalling smells, flies and desperate-looking dogs. At the entrance to the dump, a big billboard warns that trespassers will be prosecuted. This spectacle is apparently not for those who came to spend thousands of dollars seeking Eden.

And "Eden" it is, some 20 miles from Lautoka, on reclaimed land that is called Denerau Island. It used to be a backwater with mangroves and serene tranquility. Now you can choose from several luxury hotels: Westin, Sofitel, Sheraton, Hilton, Radisson. There is a golf course; there are tennis courts, private luxury villas, marinas, posh steak houses and cafes, souvenir shops and a delicatessen. Every night, visitors are offered lavish shows consisting of traditional "meke" dances.



Private beach of the Sofitel Hotel Nadi

It goes without saying that the paradise of the 21st century is not "public". It is guarded. It is gated. It has its own armed security personnel. One has to be a foreigner or an extremely rich Fijian or a member of the military (whose top brass are both rich and corrupt, earning large sums from "peace missions" abroad, raking off dollars from sending active-duty or retired soldiers as mercenaries on dubious missions to hotspots all over the world) to have access to this exclusive club - several square miles of manicured lawns and gardens, of perfumed servants and relative safety and security.

Last week, just a few miles outside the gate, on the access road to 'Paradise', a young woman was dragged by her hair to the bush and brutally raped. Poverty and frustration fuel a culture of violence. Military government is increasingly arrogant towards its own people and international community. The racial divide between native Fijians and Indo-Fijians is growing. Prices are rising astronomically, making Fiji one of the world's most expensive countries.

But bright yellow catamarans are still cruising between Denerau and the splendid Yasawa and Mamanuca Island Groups; sprinklers are irrigating golf courses and hotel gardens and evening shows go on, dancers performing for

mesmerized audiences.

Fiji is witnessing a new type of mass tourism, which can be described as "gated tourism", or in some places even as "tourism behind barbed wire". In Asia and Oceania the trend is already established in places like Indonesia's Bali and luxury resort areas in India, Sri Lanka, Samoa and Papua New Guinea.

"The entire situation is obscene", explains Joseph Veramu, head of the Lautoka Campus of the University of the South Pacific and Fiji's leading novelist. Veramu is my 'guide' to the local slums as well as to the rich estates. "We have new developments here, called 'Fantasy Island'. There is so much poverty in Fiji, but the rich are insisting on living in their dream world, in their fake gothic and neo-Roman fantasy. Of course the people of Fiji are aware of terrible and deep injustice, but so far they are not able to organize themselves. But that's the story of this part of the world in general."

'Veidogo' means 'swamps'. But it is also the name of a new settlement outside Lautoka. Nobody knows exactly how many people live here, as no official census has been conducted in the poorest areas. There is no road connecting Veidogo with the rest of the world. During the rainy season, a narrow path leading to Sireli, a suburb of Lautoka, can easily change into a muddy creek. Houses are built from cartons and plywood; some have metal sheets as roofs. There is no glass in the windows.



Lautoka homes

"Most of our children don't go to school. And in the rainy season they cannot pass through the dirt. The nearest school is 3 kilometers away", explains Ms. Nahalo, Veidogo, a slum dweller. "Most people here work at the garbage dump, earning between 50 and 60 Fijian dollars a week (30 to 40 US dollars at the current exchange rate). This has to sustain an entire family, with prices constantly rising. This settlement doesn't even have electricity and our drinking water is rationed. We are receiving no help from this - military - government. Previous government at least came here and showed some interest, but not this one."

The second largest Fijian island - Vanua Levu - is one hour by plane away from Nadi. Although the island is poor, it hosts some of the most exclusive and expensive resorts in the world. One of them, connected with the town of Savusavu by dirt road, is called "Jean-Michel Cousteau Fiji Islands Resort". After completing my brief work on Vanua Levu, I decided to visit the resort and talk to the staff. Surprisingly, the place looked no more exclusive than the chain luxury hotels on Denerau Island, just smaller. But room rates here start at 575 US dollars, climbing to an astronomical 2,400 dollars per 'luxury' room per night.



What \$575 to \$2,400 a night buys in Fiji luxury

"We are doing well; our occupancy is around 80%, although elsewhere in Fiji, tourism is very hard-hit", explains Greg Taylor, General Manager. "The Military coup last year had almost no impact on bookings; just a few cancellations, but nothing substantial. There are almost no Europeans and no Asians staying here. On average we have 45% Americans and 50% Australians visitors. Those coming from the US never heard about the coup. Those from Australia heard too much about it, are tired of reading about it, and ready to go to Fiji again."

The taxi driver who is taking me to and from Jean-Michel Cousteau Fiji Island Resort is not as relaxed about the situation as the general manager. He curses the military and the situation his people have to endure:

It is good for the super rich. They come to my miserable town and see how dirty and poor it is. They take some snap-shots of the children on the street, of the market and dilapidated buses. Then they drive on this unpaved road, check into the luxury of the resort, close the door behind them and enjoy feeling so rich and privileged. I think they come here in order to feel the contrast. If they

are rich, in poor Fiji makes them feel even richer. If they are not rich in Australia or the US, they feel rich in Fiji. Why else they would build so many luxury and exclusive resorts on this struggling island? I heard that they have much more beautiful beaches in Australia and New Zealand and that prices there are lower. Then why here?"

It is very difficult for two worlds with such different standards of living to coexist next to each other in comfort and harmony. Tourists staying at one of the posh resorts can easily spend in 24 hours more than an entire unprivileged Fijian family earns in an entire year. This, naturally, creates tensions. And it is happening not only in Fiji, but also all over Southeast, South Asia, and South Pacific.

Recent political and consequently economic developments have brought gloom and desperation to the Islands of Fiji. One has but to look at the faces of ordinary men and women of Fiji to detect the frustration and fear. But they are forced to, or at least paid to, pretend otherwise. They pretend that they are happy, that the greeting "Bula!" is genuine; that they are the contented men and women in Paradise. Because paradise is what sells. People of paradise are expected to fit the stereotype of being simple, 'friendly', poor but content, always smiling.

"...Passengers of shipwrecked canoes were almost always inevitably killed and eaten", explains a cheerfully huge billboard at the Sofitel Hotel. Cannibalism, which was wiped out in Fiji by Christians only 130 years ago, obviously sells. Souvenir stores offer wooden forks that were said to have been used to torture victims and to consume human flesh. The grizzly but titillating account goes on:

Generally, those eaten were enemies killed in war, but other categories of people (conquered people, slaves) could also be legitimately killed to acquire a 'bokola' at any time. This was necessary because certain regular events required human sacrifice: the construction of temples, chief's houses and sacred canoes, or an installation rites of a chief..."

"Then, as now, the best cuts went to the chiefs and priests", comments a laconically bored hotel guest, who apparently had studied cannibalism in detail. "Christians never wiped cannibalism out, anyway. They just changed the menu. The rich here don't have to stick forks into the human body, anymore. There are different ways to kill, destroy or consume human beings."



Real estate for sale in Fiji gated community

I don't know the answers to the questions raised by the taxi driver in Savusavu. All I am certain of is that there are more and more fences, barbed wires and gates in both Asia and Pacific. And that the gap between the rich and desperately poor is deepening at alarming speed, while we are told that everything is fine, that we should enjoy traveling, love each other

and live happily and harmoniously under the wise guidance of the markets and free trade.

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This article was written for Japan Focus. Posted on December 29, 2007.

See his other reports on the Pacific Island

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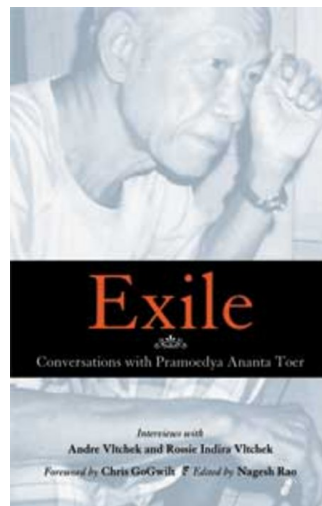
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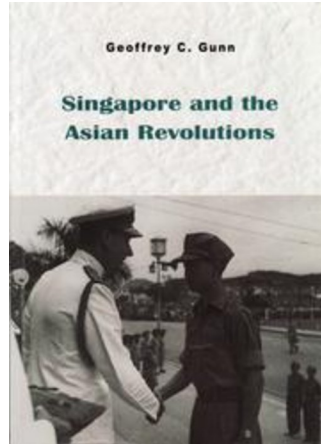
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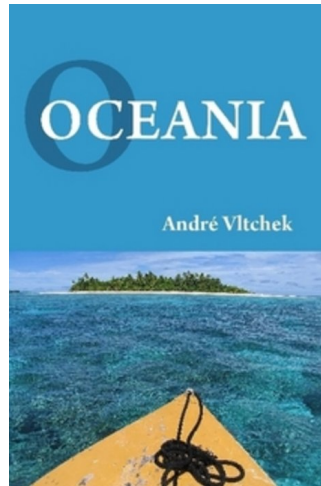
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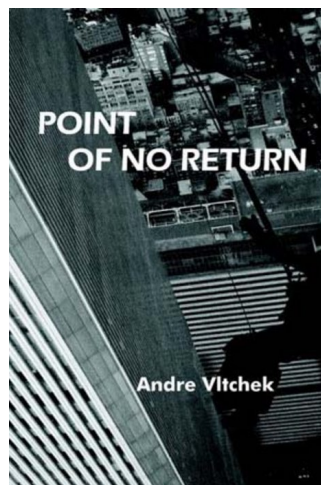
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