

Whose Pacific? U.S. Security Interests in American Samoa from the Age of Empire to the Pacific Pivot

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Abstract

I explore the imperial history of Samoa in the context of President Barack Obama's recent revalorization of the Pacific as a field of strategic interest for the United States. Samoa, I argue, deserves our attention because it represents a microcosm for the long history of U.S. imperialism in the Pacific, its various afterlives in the present, and, quite possibly, the shape of things to come. First, I analyze the ways in which U.S. decision-makers perceived the South Pacific at the end of the nineteenth century as an increasingly important region for trade as well as the projection of military and political power. The result of this growing interest was a naval station in Pago Pago and the annexation of American Samoa in 1899, which remains an unincorporated territory of the United States to this day. Second, I trace continuities and changes in these dominant perceptions across the twentieth century into the still imperial present. Third and finally, I analyze how Samoans have continuously fought against the reductive perspectives from the imperial center which, ever since annexation, was more interested in the islands' strategic location than in their inhabitants.

Introduction

On his visit to Canberra last November, President Obama reminded the Australian Parliament of a fundamental truth: "The United States has been, and always will be, a Pacific nation." Echoing William Seward's comments a century and a half earlier, Obama went on to say that "as a Pacific nation, the United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future, by upholding core principles and in close partnership with our allies and friends." To advance security, prosperity, and human rights in the region, Obama announced the deployment of 2,500 soldiers to Darwin on the northern coast of Australia by 2016.

This renewed attention towards the Pacific raises a host of questions around the past, present, and future of U.S. imperialism in the region. If, as Obama claims, the United States is 'here to stay' in the Pacific, how do we historicize this colonization of the future within the longer trajectory of U.S. imperial projects beyond California? Are U.S. foreign-policy makers already preparing themselves for the looming imperial succession from Washington to Beijing? And how do Pacific Islanders themselves react to such statements about the future of a region they have called their home for centuries?

In this article, I explore the imperial history of Samoa in the context of Obama's revalorization of the Pacific as a field of strategic and economic interests for the United States. Samoa, I argue, deserves our special attention because it represents a microcosm for the long history of U.S. imperialism in the Pacific, its various afterlives in the present, and, quite possibly, also the shape of things to come. Relying on naval intelligence reports, policy papers, presidential speeches, and newspaper articles, I shall, first, analyze the ways in which U.S. decision-makers at the end of the nineteenth century came to perceive the Pacific as an increasingly important region for trade as well as the projection of military power. The result of this growing interest was a naval station in Pago Pago and the formal annexation of American

Samoa in 1899, which remains an unincorporated territory of the United States to this day.¹ Second, I shall trace the continuities in these dominant perceptions across the twentieth century into the still imperial present. I shall conclude by analyzing how Samoans and other Pacific Islanders have continuously fought against the reductive perspectives of the imperial center which, ever since annexation, was more interested in the islands' strategic location than in the lives and livelihoods of their inhabitants.

From Old to New Pacific, 1880-1900

The Samoan Islands, located roughly halfway between Honolulu and Sydney, emerged on the map of U.S. policy-makers in the years after the Civil War when politicians such as Secretary of State William Seward pushed for a greater U.S. presence in the Pacific. In 1878, U.S. Navy Commander Richard Meade negotiated a treaty with Samoan chiefs that guaranteed the right to build a coaling station in Pago Pago on the eastern island of Tutuila. Given the growing presence of other imperial powers in the region—such as Great Britain and France, and later also Germany and Japan—the interests of the U.S. Navy in one of the best harbors in the whole Pacific was far from secure.

Driven by Social Darwinist ideas, the imminent closing of the mainland frontier, and the growing influence of economic factors on foreign policy-making, an ideological consensus emerged in the 1880s among U.S. politicians and businessmen, who argued that the acquisition of colonies was crucial to defend U.S. trading and shipping interests in the Pacific. Rear-Admiral and Naval College professor Alfred Thayer Mahan encapsulated this mercantilist imperialism when he wrote in 1890: “Whether they will or no, Americans must now begin to look outward. The growing production of the country demands it. An increasing volume of public sentiment demands it” (22). Similarly, William F. Draper, a Republican representative of Massachusetts, argued in the 1890s that with a proper fleet and bases in Hawai'i and Samoa, the United States would “hold the Pacific as an American Ocean, dominated by American commercial enterprise for all time” (Pratt 31).

The rise of navalism in the 1880s was fuelled by and, in turn, fuelled a significant shift in dominant perceptions of the Pacific among U.S. decision-makers. Before the 1880s, the Pacific was seen as a space for commercial and heroic enterprise for U.S. businessmen, explorers, and missionaries. Herman Melville's Pacific novels *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847)—and, to a lesser extent, also *Moby-Dick* (1851)—represent the best-known and also one of the last examples for this older way of portraying the Pacific and its peoples. Commanders of the Old Navy, such as Robert Shufeldt, who had travelled through the Pacific in the late 1870s, approached the Pacific as a space of excitement, filled with a diverse set of people who deserved recognition. To be sure, Americans rarely saw the exotic and peculiar peoples they encountered in the Pacific as their equals, but, by and large, respected the integrity of their cultures and economies (Shulman 75).

This began to change in the 1880s when economic considerations entered the political arena more forcefully in the wake of the original Great Depression which started in 1873 and lasted for over two decades. Simultaneously, influential voices in the Navy such as Mahan began to advocate a more aggressive military policy in the Pacific as a response to increasing

¹ Among the six inhabited unincorporated territories of the United States today, American Samoa remains the only one with the distinction of also being ‘unorganized.’ For a detailed discussion of the legal status of American Samoa, see Leibowitz 17-26, 402n3.

competition from other imperial powers. U.S. Navy planners, presidents, and businessmen began to narrow their vision of the Pacific, focusing more on the *projection* of U.S. military and economic power instead of the *protection* of its peoples. While traders, explorers, and missionaries had been active in the Pacific since the founding of the U.S. republic, the last quarter of the nineteenth century saw a significant narrowing of dominant U.S. visions of the Pacific.

Put in slightly simplified terms, the Old Navy's Pacific—marked by an awareness of the reality of diverse, if exotic, peoples living in it—gave way to the New Navy's Pacific as a space for imperial and economic expansion with little to no regard for its inhabitants. The New Navy's Pacific was a space of potentiality: for trade, at its best, and for war, at its worst. In the eyes of a growing number of U.S. policy-makers in the 1880s, Social Darwinism, European power politics, and technological changes—such as new ships and the professionalization of the Navy—transformed the precarious cultural relativity of the old Pacific into a firm cultural hierarchy with white Anglo-Saxons on top (Lake and Reynolds Chapter 8). Mahan's influence in this shift cannot be overstated. It is safe to assume that his personal alienation as a commander in the Pacific in the late 1860s, and again in the mid-1880s, shaped his ideas about the Pacific and its peoples (Shulman 79). In Mahan's strategic writings, widely disseminated in the U.S. public at the time, the Pacific turned into a blank slate upon which the United States could write its imperial destiny (93f.).

In the context of this rising new navalism, Samoa gained in strategic importance for the U.S. Navy because of its privileged position between Hawai'i and Australia and its potential as a coaling station for the expanding steamship fleet. In 1887, the U.S. Navy secured the right to establish a coaling and repair station in Pearl Harbor from Hawai'ian King Kalakaua, but the search for useful naval bases continued. In summer 1898, the Navy's General Board, on which Mahan served, found the location of Pago Pago "so suitable in case of operations in that quarter, that [...] political possession of the whole island in which the port is, or at least of ground sufficient for fortifications, is desirable" (Kennedy, *Samoa Tangle* 143).

Yet, the situation in Samoa proved more difficult than expected. Rivalries among Samoan royal families claiming one of the four *papas* (or kingly titles) have been a constant in the history of the islands for centuries. This long-standing competitive nature of Samoan politics intensified as German traders, British and French missionaries, and their respective governments became involved more directly in the 1860s. After repeated civil wars and diplomatic entanglements, Germany, Great Britain and the United States reluctantly agreed in 1889 to share their sovereignty over Samoa in a so-called tridominium. When soon thereafter new trouble arose, Samoa was finally split into two parts, the western part becoming German, the eastern part becoming American, with Great Britain withdrawing from Samoa for compensation in other colonial areas. Bartlett Tripp, the U.S. member of the Samoan Commission sent to the islands to investigate the recent conflict and suggest plans for the future, urged to keep Pago Pago as the "Gibraltar of the Pacific" (Dep. of State 638). Mahan himself saw the international conflict over Samoa as an example of increasing German aggressiveness in the Pacific: "The incident of the Samoa Islands," he wrote in 1890, "trivial apparently, was nevertheless eminently suggestive of European ambitions. America then roused from sleep as to interests closely concerning her future" (Mahan 7).

According to the Berlin Treaty of 1899, the United States was guaranteed the harbor of Pago Pago, and Tutuila—as well as a group of small islands to the east—came under the rule of the U.S. Navy. The erection of coal sheds in Pago Pago harbor had already begun in the

preceding summer. Mainly concerned with defending Pago Pago as a naval base, the U.S. naval administration instituted a system of indirect colonial rule and, by and large, took relatively little interest in the local affairs of Samoans, except when they interfered with the Navy's larger interests. As we will see later, American Samoans themselves came to resist military rule over their islands more vocally in the 1920s.

The Influence of Mahan's Thought Upon Obama's Pacific Pivot

As I was doing research for my dissertation on the history of colonial Samoa, I was struck by the number of newspaper articles on the growing military importance of the Pacific in the present. As I started to look more closely, I soon noticed disturbing echoes in the ways in which the Pentagon and the Obama Administration framed their renewed interest in the region. Now, as at the turn of the preceding century, the military and economic interests of the United States in the Pacific have taken precedence over the lives and livelihoods of the various peoples and environments that make up the region.

As Obama himself announced in his address to the Australian Parliament last fall, the United States is a Pacific nation and would be here to stay. Given the long history of U.S. imperialism in the Pacific, most Pacific Islanders could not but take this announcement as a threat. The United States currently operates 300 bases in seven sovereign states and as many U.S. controlled territories in and around the Pacific with over 330,000 military personnel and 190 ships. And if we are to believe the President's and his Defense Secretary's recent comments, this considerable military presence in the Pacific is only set to grow in the future (Carter; Panetta). As a Pentagon report from January 2012 puts it in characteristically blunt fashion: "U.S. economic and security interests are inextricably linked to developments in the arc extending from the Eastern Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia, creating a mix of evolving challenges and opportunities. Accordingly, while the U.S. military will continue to contribute to security globally, *we will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region*" (2).

The putative necessity of this Pacific pivot of the U.S. military today, I argue, has to be seen within the longer history of U.S. perceptions of the Pacific as a space for the projection of power irrespective of the people living in the region. To be sure, this historical continuity in dominant ways of seeing the Pacific can partly be explained by the institutional bias of the military establishment and its influence on U.S. foreign policy-making. After all, it is the job of the Pentagon to prepare for potential wars and secure U.S. trade in an increasingly important region. But Mahan's echoes in Obama's speech are not reducible to the exigencies of military planning and economic interests. For 'national interests' are not God-given, even in a country that the first white settlers believed God had given them. As American Samoans and other Pacific Islanders can readily attest, U.S. national interests have rarely taken their local concerns into account and this trend is set to continue in the coming years and decades if we are not aware of its deep roots in the history of U.S. imperialism in the Pacific.

Samoan Resistance to the Militarization of Their Life Worlds

As historians Setsu Shigematsu and Keith Camacho have recently argued, the Pacific today is "simultaneously commodified and exploited for its *visible* militarist and tourist value yet ultimately made *invisible* in its human diversity and complexity" (Shigematsu and Camacho xxx,

emphasis added). It is precisely this reduction in the complexity of their lives and livelihoods that Samoans, other Pacific Islanders, and Asians have continuously sought to challenge. From the beginning of U.S. interest in Samoa in the 1870s, Samoans have worked to retain control over their long-grown system of social relations and, thus, the contours of everyday life.

In the early 1920s, a larger opposition movement called the *Mau* (Samoan for holding fast) formed in American Samoa, still under U.S. Navy rule. Among the Samoan complaints were irregularities in the copra trade, the prohibition of interracial marriages, and, closest to our concerns here, accusations of discrimination in the relative pay and benefits for the *Fita Fita*, the Samoan police guard (Chappell 235f.). Essentially, the *Mau* followers questioned the colonial rule of difference between American Samoans and white members of the U.S. Navy, who professed they were only there to protect them. American Samoans reacted with a copra boycott and thus practically shut down the naval government which depended on the taxes drawn from the sale of copra. Captain Waldo Evans, the new Governor sent to Pago Pago, quickly exonerated some of the accused protesters and created a more transparent Native Tax Fund which reassured the *Mau* followers. Most Samoans resumed cutting copra soon thereafter.

The *Mau* movement persisted however and spread throughout American Samoa during the 1920s, becoming something like a watchdog of the Navy (Chappell 251; Leibowitz 416). In response to more than a decade of protest, the U.S. Congress ratified the Deeds of Cession from 1900 (Tutuila) and 1904 (Manua) in 1929 and transformed American Samoa from an illegal to a legal colony (Leibowitz 416). In the following year, the Samoan Commission sent by Congress proposed a more comprehensive Organic Act for Samoa, including a bill of rights with full U.S. citizenship, legislative power, exclusive land tenure rights for Samoans, and a civil governor appointed by the President. But partly due to inattention in Washington, partly due to Samoan reservations, Congress failed to pass the Samoa Act. The question of American Samoa's legal status would be picked up again only after World War Two (Chappell 255).

The years between the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914 and the end of the Second World War in 1945 saw a massive build-up of U.S. military installations throughout the Pacific, including in American Samoa. During World War Two, American Samoa played a crucial role as a supply base in the island-hopping strategy to push back the Japanese Navy. This created opportunities for wage labor and military enlistment for many American Samoans (Franco 373). In January 1942, the Japanese even attacked the islands, but did little damage and American Samoa continued to be an important fueling stop and convoy terminus on the vital route through the South Pacific. Military installations on American Samoa expanded considerably during the war. Construction of a naval air base and further fortifications of Pago Pago harbor began in summer 1940. At its peak, more than 1,500 laborers—three-quarter of whom were Samoan—toiled to complete the new military installations by draining swamps, constructing landfills, and building roads in the face of tropical heat and heavy rain. After the war, the U.S. Marines moved on, but U.S. control over American Samoa—and its forever altered landscapes—remained.

After the end of the Pacific war, U.S. military facilities in American Samoa were no longer needed as the United States moved its attention to Western Europe as the central battleground of the early Cold War. In 1951, the U.S. naval station in Pago Pago officially closed. The following year, more than two hundred Samoan military families were relocated to Hawai'i, starting a trans-Pacific chain migration centered around Navy bases that continues into the present (Franco 385). As dependency on U.S. economic aid and careers in the U.S. military increased, the bolder *mau* movement among American Samoans in the interwar years gave way to a more moderate approach in the 1950s. When Guam received its Organic Act in 1950, many

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American Samoans leaders grew more hesitant about the potential drawbacks to greater formal integration into the U.S. imperial system, particularly changes that would undermine the patriarchal *matai* system based on communal landholding. In 1987, American Samoans finally rejected a constitutional revision and Organic Act for their islands, mainly due to concerns about the communal landholding system and minimum wage requirements (Leibowitz 462ff.; Blackford 198).

In other parts of the ‘American Pacific’ the U.S. military used whole islands as test sites for the unprecedented power of nuclear arms. From 1946 to 1962, no fewer than 66 nuclear tests were conducted in the Bikini Atolls in the Marshall Islands, held under the unique legal arrangement of U.S. ‘strategic trusteeship.’ Luckily, American Samoans were spared this particularly devastating part of U.S. nuclear colonialism in the Pacific. But the longer history of economic dependency, environmental degradation, and military recruitment are still visible in American Samoa today. Some American Samoans, like former Member of Congress Eni F.H. Faleomavaega, have been calling for increased political representation for their islands in the U.S. Congress because American Samoans have been disproportionately represented in the U.S. armed forces. “Many Samoan soldiers,” he emphasized, “have given the ultimate sacrifice, knowing they could not vote for the President of the United States” (13). This argument for martial citizenship emerged from a longer tradition of U.S. military colonization of the Pacific and its human ‘resources.’

In stark contrast to such arguments for further inclusion based on participation in U.S. militarism, many Pacific Islanders continue to resist the militarization of their life worlds. The cross-Pacific initiative *Women for Genuine Security* is a case in point. Founded in 1996, the anti-militarist organization consists of women activists from the Philippines, Okinawa, South Korea, Guam, Hawai’i, and Puerto Rico. According to its mission statement, the organization “promotes critical analysis, activist partnerships and greater accountability of the U.S. government for the violence, environmental devastation, and sexual abuse caused by the U.S. military in countries that host U.S. forces and bases.” *Women for Genuine Security* does not have a chapter in American Samoa—for now. As the Department of Defense has reassured me in a recent email exchange, in contrast to the substantial expansion of the U.S. military presence in Guam, no new bases or extensions of existing ones are planned in American Samoa. But, if history is any guide to the future, this might change as China comes to be seen as a growing threat to U.S. security interests in the region. Significantly, Paul Kennedy, whose 1974 dissertation actually analyzed the Samoan tangle as a poignant example for great power confrontation, recently argued that the “Chinese naval build-up [today] is only in its early stages, like, say, the U.S. Navy was in the 1890s” (“Rise and Fall of Navies”). Today, most American Samoans depend on remittances from relatives in Hawai’i and the mainland as well as on U.S. federal aid money and access to careers in the U.S. military. American Samoa’s continued economic dependency on the imperial center is inextricably linked to the longer history of U.S. power projection in the Pacific.

Conclusion

As Puerto Rican independence activist Pedro Albizu Campos famously claimed in the 1930s, the United States was “interested in the cage not the birds” (Sandars 38). The same holds true for the Pacific. Studying this imperial past helps to illuminate our imperial present and might point the way to a more democratic future in which the Pacific and its peoples are active shapers of their lives and livelihoods. Obama’s own Pacific biography—from his birth in the only U.S.

Pacific island with full statehood and his four-year stay in Indonesia as a child to his extensive travels throughout the region as President—should alert us to the long continuities in U.S. perceptions of the Pacific and incite new historical research. Channeling ancient East Asian wisdom, Obama concluded his speech in Canberra with a statement that disavowed the long history of U.S. imperialism in the Pacific: “Across a vast ocean, it’s impossible to know what lies beyond the horizon.” It is our task as scholars of Pacific history to question the very conditions that continue to make imperial history, such as U.S. involvement in Samoa, ‘impossible to know’—or rather recognize—for America’s first Pacific President.

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