



Being Political: Leadership and Democracy in the Pacific Islands

Unofficial Diplomacy: The American Institute in Taiwan – A Memoir

Review by MICHAEL JON STOIL

Being Political: Leadership and Democracy in the Pacific Islands by Jack Corbett. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015. 243 pp. \$54.00.

Unofficial Diplomacy: The American Institute in Taiwan – A Memoir by David Dean. Bloomington, IN: XLibris, 2014. 283 pp. \$19.99.

The Minds of Pacific Policy Makers

The central problem of political science as an empirical discipline is the lack of reliable information about its principal object of study. At its heart, political science illuminates the process through which individuals make choices that affect the future of a political community. Although many people may contribute to this process, the ideal focus of the discipline is on the relatively small number of political leaders and government officials who ultimately make the most important decisions in terms of laws, regulations, and political activities. Unfortunately, elite leaders and government officials rarely provide opportunities to gain objective insights into their thoughts. Too often, the information they reveal for public consumption about why they have made specific choices takes the form of rationalization and justification, rather than honest perception of what *really* went into their thinking. Scholars are then left to speculate and theorize on what might have been the actual motivations, influences, and logic behind the outcome of the political process.

Occasionally, however, we are presented with relatively unclouded windows into the minds of political leaders and policy makers. These take the form of autobiographies and memoirs by members of the political elite, collections of personal letters and diaries, and both print and interviews of current and former participants in policy-making by scholars whose training enables them to distinguish frank responses from self-serving statements. Perhaps the best-known example consists of James Madison's candid *Notes on the Constitutional Convention of 1787*, in which a principal author of the U.S. Constitution provided a daily record of the process of its formation, including observations on the likely motivations and concerns of the other participants. A poignant recent example is former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's 1995 memoir about decision-making in the U.S. war in Indochina, *In Retrospect*, in which he explained, "We were wrong, terribly wrong. We owe it to future generations to explain why" (p. xx).

Most of these glimpses into the thought processes of the political and policy-making elite have concentrated on U.S., Commonwealth, and European leadership. Barriers of language, culture, and Western prejudice largely limit the publication of objective memoirs and interviews about policy-making in the developing world. The resulting absence of access to primary source material about the political process as seen by those responsible for its outcome in Latin America,

Africa, Asia, and the Pacific contributes to the rise of generalized theories explaining leadership in these areas. The “professional politician” model, the “developmental” model, and models based on cultural generalizations about a region tend to dominate descriptions of what is—or what should be—the thinking of these elites.

For this reason, the two works reviewed here are valuable exceptions to this tendency to oversimplify elite decision-making in the Pacific region. Jack Corbett’s *Being Political* represents an earnest effort to compile both original interviews and previously published accounts to illustrate the life stories of elected legislators in the post-independence Pacific islands. *Unofficial Diplomacy* is an extraordinarily candid discussion of a crucial period in U.S.-Pacific relations by the late founding director of the American Institute in Taiwan. Both works are flawed, but nevertheless competently address important gaps in our understanding of the motives behind leadership activities in Pacific politics.

Being Political reads like a doctoral dissertation, and Jack Corbett admits that its origin was his studies for the Ph.D. at Australian National University. Its primary source material consists of 112 original interviews by the author of elected legislators and heads-of-government roughly evenly divided among Melanesia, Polynesia, and Micronesia. The topic of these interviews was the perception of the individual officials of the process of recruitment into the political elite, activities and roles assumed in office, and expectations and frustrations experienced in political life. These interviews were supplemented by 39 published biographies, interviews, and memoirs of additional current and former post-independence leaders of the Pacific Islands. Insights from these sources are grouped in five chapters comprising the career elements of elected legislators: “Arriving” (on the development of political consciousness), “Running and Representing,” “Legislating and Governing,” “Motivations, Intentions, and Rewards,” and “Leading and Leaving.” Liberally endowed with entertaining quotes from the anonymous interviewees, these chapters are an invaluable source for anyone interested in the roles adopted by parliament members in the post-independence Pacific. A brief final chapter entitled “Understanding Politicians” provides an attempt to synthesize the findings.

The attempt at synthesis is perhaps the greatest weakness of this volume. Throughout the preceding chapters, he documents the diversity of background, intentions, and perceptions of the Pacific island legislators. In doing so, Corbett documents the weaknesses of the application of the “professional politician” and the “developmental leadership” models to Oceania. He is less successful in refuting the belief that the behaviors and decisions of the leadership are dominated by island culture. For example, he approvingly quotes former Fiji Vice President Joni Madraiwiwi’s 2006 essay, “Governance in Fiji: The Interplay Between Indigenous Tradition, Culture, and Politics”:

Fijian society has been in a state of transition for several decades. Leadership is now a combination of some of those of chiefly rank, senior Fijian bureaucrats, politicians, church persons, and civil society representatives. The current plethora of political parties is a further weakening of traditional Fijian leadership....

At the same time, Corbett’s interviews remind the reader that the Pacific island electorate continues to expect their legislator to serve as the conduit for personal favors derived from off-island financial sources. Thus, although pre-colonial traditions play a decreasing role in island politics, the cultural legacy of colonial rule in terms of the perception of the State as an institutional “Santa Claus” remains extremely powerful.

The diversity of views presented by Pacific leadership also frustrates an attempt to identify overarching commonalities that explain decision-making in Pacific polities. One possible explanation is the limitations on resources and talent inherent in small island developing states (SIDS). Such limitations are less applicable in the relatively populous and resource-rich islands of Melanesia than in Polynesia or Micronesia; in fact, it would be astounding if national political leadership among the seven million people of Papua New Guinea operated similarly to national political leadership among the 21,000 people of Palau. Corbett occasionally suggests that politics in Melanesia indeed is different from politics elsewhere in the newly-independent Pacific and perhaps the rich data sources that he tapped can be used to explore this possibility.

David Dean's memoir, *Unofficial Diplomacy*, was completed during the final years of his life and was independently published by his widow. Dean was an international relations scholar prior to joining the U.S. Foreign Service in 1951, but his connection to the Pacific region dates from a visit to Taiwan in 1947. Fluent in Chinese and deeply admiring of the Taoist and Confucian traditions, he combined the insightful objectivity of the professional analyst with the winning personality and modesty of the professional diplomat. Dean already had served with distinction in Taiwan, Beijing, and Hong Kong when Richard Nixon held his world-changing meeting with Mao Zedong; he was both an active participant and a keen observer of the process that led to U.S. recognition of the People's Republic of China and the establishment of government-funded private representation of U.S. interests on Taiwan. Dean literally sacrificed his State Department career to implement this process as the first Director of the American Institute on Taiwan (AIT), and the focus of his memoir is on U.S.-Taiwanese relations during the first 20 years of the Institute's existence.

Establishment of the AIT coincided with the end of my own State Department career. Occurring simultaneously with the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, the return of the Canal Zone to Panamanian control, and the end of the U.N. Law of the Sea Conference, hardly anyone at State recognized the significance of the event. Dean describes it as the first time that a private organization assumed responsibility for U.S. relations with an effectively sovereign territory. The replacement of the U.S. embassy in Taipei with the AIT was a crucial transition for China and, indirectly, for East Asia and the Pacific. The subsequent evolution of Taiwan itself owes a great deal to the decisions made by David Dean and his colleagues described in detail in this work.

The picture that emerges from *Unofficial Diplomacy* is of a process that constantly had to be reinvented rather than a well-planned transition. The AIT was established with a minimal budget that did not even cover the cost of furniture for its Washington offices. With no established rules of procedure, AIT staff had to tread carefully to avoid the appearance of an official diplomatic mission. Dean documents the level of hostility directed at the U.S. and the AIT due to the alleged betrayal of the Nationalist Chinese regime, as well as the rebuilding of trust over time. He describes the efforts of specific individuals who assisted in reestablishing an effective working relationship. Without characterizing anyone as a villain, he also identifies those whose attitudes and beliefs threatened the effectiveness of the AIT, including Chinese spy chief General Wang Sheng and Secretary of State Alexander Haig.

One major surprise of *Unofficial Diplomacy* is the role played by the son of Chiang Kai-shek who served as President of Nationalist China and head of the Kuomintang during the 1980s. President Chiang Ching-kuo always has been a somewhat shadowy figure since he clearly owed his position to the authoritarian regime that his father had established on Taiwan. Dean's description of Chiang Ching-kuo highlights the difficult but effective efforts on the part of the

Chinese leader to redefine his regime. Those interested in successful peaceful transition from authoritarian to democratic rule will probably benefit from scholarly attention to this often-neglected national leader.

Unofficial Diplomacy is not a conventionally scholarly work. It is unevenly written and includes a few passages that appear to be repeated verbatim. Some events are described in excessive detail—notably the Senate hearings on the establishment of the AIT—while others are addressed in too little detail, perhaps because of the need for continued secrecy. Dean's memoir, however, is an essential primary source on an important aspect of U.S. relations with the Asia Pacific. It is indeed fortunate that David Dean lived long enough to present this information to posterity and that both his scholarly and professional training made him an excellent analyst and observer. We also are fortunate that his family was willing to make the effort to publish this material after his death and leave scholarship with greater insight into the minds behind Pacific policy-making.

References

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