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Abstract

This piece examines empire by purchase and lease in the Pacific and the manner by which the United States gained control over a series of strategically valuable islands in the region. Because Washington obtained its possessions partly through purchase and lease, and not via invasion, it argues that the United States can hide its standing as an empire. Therefore, this research suggests that the literature on empire, order, and hierarchy in international relations needs to allow for a more expansive definition of empire to better understand this important but understudied concept.

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***'The Island of Thieves':
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Abstract

This piece examines empire by purchase and lease in the Pacific and the manner by which the United States gained control over a series of strategically valuable islands in the region. Because Washington obtained its possessions partly through purchase and lease, and not via invasion, it argues that the United States can hide its standing as an empire. Therefore, this research suggests that the literature on empire, order, and hierarchy in international relations needs to allow for a more expansive definition of empire to better understand this important but understudied concept.

Key Words

Empire, The United States, the Pacific, Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Kwajalein, Guam/Guåhån

“A Marshallese without land is no Marshallese at all”
Old Marshallese saying (Erickson 2011, 44)

Empires are frequently imagined as military behemoths conquering all. The commercially successful Sega computer game *Empire* with its tag line “Total War” illustrates this notion. Nevertheless, this piece investigates a frequently ignored strategy of imperial development: viz. that empires can be acquired by way of lease and purchase, a means of expansion resembling the way by which individuals obtain property when playing the board game *Monopoly* (Alessio 2010). Such expansion is generally successful if assessed by: the amount of land territory obtained; the length of imperial control; a lack of excessive military and administrative expenditure when achieving this outcome; few immediate lives lost; and a lack of international criticism. This empire-building process is particularly relevant to the evolution of the continental 19th century United States as evidenced by its purchases of the Louisiana, Alaska, and Gadsden territories, whose combined area of land is staggeringly large. Alessio and Renfro (2015) argue that this method of expansion has been hidden in plain sight and this helps explain why many do not consider the nation imperial. Building upon previous work on this subject this article contends that Washington’s expansion through purchase or

lease is ongoing and understudied. Moreover, this research uses the literature on empire and a case study of Washington's *imperium* in the Micronesian Pacific to demonstrate that the U.S. has long been, and continues to be, an imperial power – despite political, cultural, and academic claims to the contrary.

Although the U.S. continues to evolve its empire via purchase and lease in several other extra-territorial strategic theatres, such as Diego Garcia and Guantanamo (Alessio and Renfro 2016), the topic of leased American bases on Kwajalein (Kwaj) and Guam (Guåhån in Chamorro) remains under-examined. Indeed, there has been a lack of scholarly attention to America's place in the Micronesian Pacific. This is in spite of the region's increasing importance global military and economic affairs. Most extant work on Washington's position in the Pacific focuses on East Asia, especially Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. These accounts, while rich, often emphasize globalization, finance, or alliance structures (Harvey 2005; Wade 2003; Press-Barnathan 2014), all the while circumventing debates over American empire. This work helps to remedy this *lacuna* by focusing on an understudied part of the Pacific, namely Kwaj and Guam, and also makes a positive contribution to the literature on American empire by offering a framework and case study that suggests that American empire is alive and well.

Kwaj is the most sizable isle in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI). The RMI comprises 181 square kilometres of land on some 29 atolls and five large islands with a population of *circa* 71,000. Kwaj is also the site of the largest coral atoll in the world and is significant in the history of the Cold War; 11 of its 97 islands were leased by United States military forces as support bases for that country's nuclear testing programme on nearby Bikini and Enewetak atolls. Today the Kwaj base is called the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defence Test site and it remains "the centre" of a

“sophisticated military hardware” operation, including radar and telemetry stations, anti-ballistic missile testing, and space research (Pollock 2008: 301).

Meanwhile, Guåhån (the term Guam had been adopted by United States Navy governors in the early 1900s), is roughly the size of Barbados and has a population of circa 178,000, just over a third of whom are indigenous Chamorro. The Department of Defense has called it “Fortress Pacific” as it houses five American military bases, including a homeport for Polaris nuclear submarines. The importance of both islands is underscored by Japan’s desire to reclaim land occupied by the U.S. military which prompted Washington to look for other basing opportunities in the Pacific. Although Washington will retain a significant presence in Okinawa, the Department of Defense plans to relocate some forces currently based in Japan to expanded facilities in Guåhån (Kan 2014). Current plans call for an additional 4,700 marines and their families at the expanded site by the 2020s (Burke 2014).

Both of these military sites, which continue to be leased, are seen as increasingly important to United States strategic defence imperatives in the wake of: China’s regional aspirations; North Korea’s nuclear volatility; and an over-“dependence on foreign-hosted bases” amongst its allies, in particular Japan and South Korea, which are facing concerted domestic pressure for troop reductions (Erickson 2008: 65). Indeed, these small Pacific island bases form part of Washington’s “Pivot to Asia,” (Le Miere 2012). Consequently, at least from a United States perspective, these islands are perceived to be a Goldilocks solution. Not only are they envisioned as causing minimal political opposition experienced by some of their military forces elsewhere, but these virtually unsinkable ‘aircraft carriers’ are also strategically well-positioned. They are far enough away from immediate security threats while simultaneously not too far away to respond quickly should the need arise. By

adopting what Layne calls an “over the horizon” strategy the United States believes it can maximize its influence with minimal expense (2006, 2009).

Thus, this work seeks to draw attention to the purchasing and leasing of territory in the Pacific. While an idiographic accounting of this pattern of purchasing and leasing would help advance our understanding of global politics in an important theatre, our study suggests that it is a significant mechanism in empire building. We believe, therefore, that this work helps refine a theoretical understanding of how empires acquire influence – especially in the context of the American empire given its reliance on this particular method of expansion. Consequently, this paper seeks to draw attention to an on-going and long-running imperial practise which, although constituting a major force in geo-political developments, has been virtually disregarded. Furthermore, it demonstrates that in a period where empire allegedly stands in contrast to global norms, polities may successfully utilize lease or purchase to realise imperial aspirations without incurring repercussions. Indeed, such actions by the U.S. in the Pacific have been virtually ignored in mainstream discourse: “nobody has read a single word about it!” (Vltchek 2013: 106).

Defining empire

From the beginnings of human civilization empire has been an important form of political and social organization: “most of human history has been characterized by large formal empires” (Blanken 2012: 2). Indeed, Darwin argues that empire is the basis of how political actors structure themselves (2012). Yet in spite of decolonisation and the accompanying claim that empires are almost extinct, they remain prominent in international organization. Given that empire remains such a powerfully enduring and universal occurrence, surprisingly our conceptual understanding of it remains impoverished. Colley states that there is “an insufficiently comprehensive approach to empire” (2006: 368). Darwin (2012) and Steinmetz (2005) note that defining empire has posed a problem for

students of the phenomenon. Colas points out that empire suffers from not only a definitional problem but also acute under-theorizing (2007). Similarly, Münkler spotlights this glaring gap in the literature (2007).

Nevertheless, some scholars do examine the question of definition. For Doyle, empire is an unequal relationship when one state controls another (1986:19). He surmises that it “can be achieved by force, by political collaboration, by economic, social, or cultural dependence” (1986: 45). Bush thinks of empire as one state expanding beyond its original geographic domain (2006). Burbank and Cooper argue that empires enforce critical distinctions over the power and status of peoples in the imperial polity and its newly acquired possessions (2010). Nonetheless, in spite of attempts to define the phenomenon there is still little agreement on how one would know empire from not empire. One difficulty involves attempts, exemplified by Burbank and Cooper, to discriminate between nations and empires. Colás argues the same point, namely that empires are “expansive, coercive and hierarchical” and thus dissimilar from nation-states which are supposedly characterised by fixed boundaries (2007: 185). These attempts to provide clarity *vis-à-vis* empire are made more difficult by the range of types of empire (including the critical distinction between formal and informal empires), as well as issues of order and hierarchy. Sharman, for example, observes that, “Students of hierarchy operate on the assumption that classic imperial arrangements are now a thing of the past. They are mistaken” (2011: 190). The tensions between these definitions suggest that considerable definitional work remains necessary.

Nexon (2008: 306) notes that in informal empires the local agents typically have more power than in formal empires as the controlling power usually does not seek to manage all domains of political organization. Noting the potential confusion between formal and informal empire, Savage points out that definitions of informal empire “[c]an perhaps be confused with high levels of influence.

Indicators of informal empire must therefore demonstrate a persistent and institutionalized relationship of control by one state over another” (2010: 162). We argue that purchasing and leasing territories meets this threshold. For Savage, the most important indicator of informal empire is when the dominant state assumes crucial powers but leaves the subordinate state in charge of most domains of political activity (162). Furthermore, formal empires are readily distinguished from their informal counterparts because formal empires “require territorial control and assume[s] control over both the external and internal policies of the periphery” (162). This conception is indivisible from questions of order and hierarchy in international relations. Donnelly explores this topic and concludes, “Formal inequalities – especially coerced inequalities – were subject to sustained and withering attack in the last half of the 20th century. Informal protectorates, however, exist today in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Bosnia” (2006: 151). Importantly, he opines, “Although the issue of formality is tricky, we must avoid obscurest formalism” (151). Scholars in other disciplines have also identified the need to recognize different forms of imperialism operating in different places at different times. Mcleod in his study of postcolonial literature, while focusing on the actual creation of colonies itself, also underlines the fact that settlement is “one historically specific experience of how imperialism can work... but it is not the only way” (2000: 8). Similarly, Bickers in his discussion of leased European and Japanese concessions in China, concedes that his history is “untidy” (2012: 11).

Although this work similarly suggests that empire is certainly “tricky” it also argues that clinging too narrowly to strict definitions will hinder analytic progress. Similar points have been made in relation of definitions of fascism, for example. As Pearce argues: “There are almost as many definitions, or interpretations, of fascism as there are historians who have studied the issue” (1997: 11). Moreover, the ways in which scholars approach empire varies between disciplines -- and this includes norms over the suitability of the topic for scholarly inquiry. Within the umbrella field of international

affairs, historians and postcolonial theorists seem happier to concede that empire is important YET imprecise. Some scholars in political science, however, are more sceptical because the concept is harder to define and falsify. While this manuscript cannot solve the idiographic nomothetic divide on this topic (or any other), we argue that the study of empire ought to be a big tent lest we miss the forest for the trees. And case studies, while often misunderstood, can be of significant value. While Gerring (2004: 345) urges scholars using case studies to remove ambiguity whenever possible, he notes that “it hardly seems plausible that the... ambiguities... arise solely from the sloppy or unduly belletristic habits of case study practitioners. Indeed, a certain degree of ambiguity is *inherent* (emphasis in original) in the enterprise of the case study.” Consequently, narrow definitions of empire that hinge primarily on formalism might be “cleaner”, but they sometimes rule out many other important forms of imperial organization – including empire by lease. As Griffin likewise argues in relation to fascism, even contested definitions remain “heuristically useful” (1995: 2). Similarly, more formal conceptions of empire tend to dismiss or downplay finance and globalization as imperial processes. While the current analysis of American empire *vis-à-vis* Micronesia is mostly concerned with Washington’s direct leasing of territory it is important to note also that many observers link American empire in the Pacific and elsewhere with financial coercion and capitalism (Grandin 2006; Kiely 2010; Gindin and Panitch 2013).

A related definitional problem that is as of yet unresolved is the difference between empire as an ontology and empire (or imperialism) as a strategy. It seems clear that many political actors deny that they are empires but routinely use imperial tactics in their foreign policies, including the United States (Mallaby 2002; O’Reilly 2008; O’Reilly and Renfro 2007; Colas 2007; Alessio and Renfro 2016). This difference may be of great importance to scholars of empire but its perhaps less salient for peoples whose lived experiences confirms that empire is alive and well. Thus it turns out that, invasion aside, imperial polities may utilize many tactics to achieve their goals, including: marriage;

voluntary associations; invitation; treaties; land swaps; confiscation; indirect/informal control; as well as gifts/donations by external or transnational organizations, namely the Pacific Trust Territories conferred upon the United States by the United Nations following the defeat of Japan in World War Two. Many of these tactics should be familiar to students of empire. Indeed, since the start of the 21st century China and Taiwan have used a form of “dollar diplomacy” to obtain international support by directing aid to places like the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), which recognises the former, or the RMI which recognises the latter (D’Arcy 2014; 399). While suggesting that there are many imperial strategies which can be adopted and adapted to make an empire this paper merely aims to demonstrate an American reliance on leases to achieve its aims in Micronesia. This advance helps us draw attention to the ways in which empires operate and expand and is a useful addition to our incomplete but growing theoretical understanding of empire. This enumeration of imperial tactics is unlikely to satisfy those who reject empire as an ontological category worthy of scholarly attention because a complete definition of empire is not provided. In the literature, Biccum (2013) and Blanken (2013) represent these positions well, but neither provides a persuasive resolution. As Biccum points out, the field of international relations has not yet fully studied or come to terms with empire as an ontological category. While incomplete, we argue that this work helps rectify this lack of attention and helps advance our collective understanding of this important but understudied topic.

Washington: An Empire in Denial

This work is certainly not the first to examine the ways in which empires evolve in this manner. Motyl considers the process but thinks of it as a “dead end” because he assumes that there is no more land to obtain (2006: 193). Colley also briefly considers empire by purchase in the American context but does not fully explore the case (2006: 371). Several other works analyse the acquisition of United States territory through purchase as well, but these tend to examine such developments

as exceptional occurrences. Nevertheless, a prolific body of work on the leasing and or purchasing of military bases and other tactical possessions exists (Cooley 2000/2001, 2008; Sandars 2000; Johnson 2004; O'Reilly and Renfro 2007). These publications focus, however, on more contemporary acquisitions, thereby overlooking earlier cases, including the United States in the 19th century. Furthermore, this study also posits that such works ignore United States possessions in the Pacific. While Guåhån does receive an occasional notice Kwaj is essentially absent from most discussion. Indeed, Motyl disregards this earlier era of acquisition and conquest entirely and refuses to countenance the notion of Washington's westward expansion as imperial (2006: 192). However, we argue that empire by purchase and lease is generally downplayed but is of great importance to our understanding our empires, foreign policy, and global affairs. Furthermore, this work stresses that this kind of expansion merits sustained study because it is both commonplace and involves huge swaths of territory. In other words, the so-called 'new imperialism' which the likes of Fergusson, Boot, *et al* drew attention to following the U.S. led invasion of Iraq in 2003, is anything but new. Additionally, this strategy of territorial expansion by monopoly imperialism assists in explaining why the United States, distinct from its Japanese and European rivals, was not normally considered an empire, at least not a late 19th/early 20th century one. A number of scholars have commented upon these gaps in the imperial historiography of the United States (Burns 1957: 124; Finlay 1976: 173). Mann (2008: 7), Bush (2006: 199), and Vine (2004:132) all note that citizens and leaders of the United States generally believe that their state is not imperial. This denial lingers in spite of the more familiar revisionism of Charles Beard, Gabriel Kolko, Walter LaFeber and William Appleman Williams. Unsurprising, Colley asserts that Americans are somewhat "disengaged" and oblivious to their imperial past (2006: 374).

The United States also partially disguised its imperial ambitions *vis-à-vis* 18th and 19th century First Nations by exploiting "treaties" to gain additional land, again insinuating that imperial powers

invade but that the United States confers freely for further territory. Because the nation did participate in frequent conflict with First Nation peoples this declaration was inaccurate. Nonetheless, it allowed Washington to employ a kind of Baudrillardian “decoy”, thus masking its imperial status. Nor was the United States alone in pursuing such an approach. Indeed, the tradition of signing treaties and giving payment for land is, on the face of it, a type of arrangement common in commerce, diplomacy, and international law. Significantly, however, these agreements were often not covenants amongst sovereign equals. It should come as no surprise to learn, therefore, that the European and Japanese leases which were “forced” on Qing China “fatally impaired” the latter’s sovereignty, and have thus been called the ‘Unequal Treaties’ (Bickers 2012, 5). Chinese historians even refer to them as “imperialist crimes” (Bickers 2012, 393). Cooley and Spruyt (2009) similarly investigate strains amongst actors theoretically and legally equal but unequivocally lopsided in their economic and political authority, but their study does not encompass the relations between Euro-American settlers and First Nation peoples. Nevertheless, Hertzog (2015: 78), in an historical discussion of Iberian colonial powers in the Americas, does state that treaties were primarily about “the subjection of all things indigenous”. This one-sidedness does not negate, still, the capacity of First Nations and other less powerful actors to implement strategies of resistance to imperial powers (Cooley and Nexon, 2013: 1044). Indeed, Custer was killed and the Cherokee won their case in the Supreme Court over Georgia’s illegal trespass onto their territory. Yet eventually many First Nation peoples were removed from both Georgia and the Dakotas.

Another explanation for historians tending to disregard the relationship between the United States and empire could be due to the fact that the nation hid its domination through more politically neutral expressions, such as: ‘removal’ (the early 19th century ethnic cleansing of First Peoples such as the Cherokee); ‘commonwealth’ (the official status of Puerto Rico which was seized permanently by the United States as a result of the 1898 Spanish-American War); ‘police action’ (Harry S.

Truman's description of the Korean War); 'kinetic military action' (the term used to describe the ousting of Gaddafi in Libya); 'humanitarian intervention' (George Bush Jr's invasion of Iraq); 'counterterrorism campaign' (the description of the battle against jihadi ideologies in the contemporary Middle East); or in a Pacific context, 'trusteeship', 'unincorporated territory' and 'Compact of *Free* [our italics] Association (CFA)'. It is not surprising that Chalmers Johnson stated that "the USA...has used...euphemisms to conceal harder imperial motives" (Bush 2006: 204).

In addition to euphemism and "trick *and* treaty" a gap in the historical association between imperialism and the United States could be the result of the fact that the burgeoning republic failed to send many settlers to its overseas possessions. Furthermore, with a few maritime exceptions, namely American Samoa, Guåhån, Hawai'i, Puerto Rico, the United States Virgin Islands, and Wake (most of which are to be found in the Pacific!), did it seek to uphold formal control for a significant chunk of time. Instead, it evacuated Cuba, choosing tried and tested forms of indirect control instead, such as economic pressure, gunboat diplomacy, and/or local comprador assistance. This indirect control characterised by lack of settlement is evident too in the former Pacific Trust Territories, comprising today the afore mentioned RMI, plus the FSM (including Yap, Chuuk and Pohnpei) and the Republic of Palau (RP). These islands, alongside the Northern Mariana Islands, had been seized by the United States from Japan in World War Two. They were subsequently awarded to America three years later by the United Nations to be held in "trusteeship" by the new superpower, albeit with an obligation to help the islanders move towards self-government. The 1947 agreement also "allowed the USA to establish military bases" (Friberg 2006: 124). During discussions over the post-war situation, however, neither the United States nor the United Nations "solicited input from Micronesians", demonstrating the afore-mentioned asymmetrical differences between primary and secondary sovereignties (Hirshberg 2012: 40).

Buying and leasing imperial territory

Table One displays just some of the territories that Washington obtained directly through purchase or lease. When considering the sheer amount of land obtained by America in this fashion it is startling to note that this practice has been consistent and accounts for much of Washington's expansion.

Table One: Key Expansions Via Purchase and Lease

Territory	Purchase or Lease	Date(s)	Size
Louisiana	Purchase	1803	2,144,510 sq km
Florida	Purchase (post-conflict)	1819	170,304 sq km
Platte	Purchase	1836	8, 156 sq km
Mexican Cession	Purchase (post-conflict)	1848	851,342 sq km
Gadsden	Purchase	1853	76,800 sq km
Alaska	Purchase	1867	1,518,8000 sq km
Guam, Philippines and Puerto Rico	Purchase (post-conflict)	1898 (Philippines independent 1946)	309,648 sq km
Guantanamo Bay	Lease (post-conflict)	1903	120 sq km
Panama Canal Zone	Purchase	1903 - 1979	32 sq km
United States Virgin Islands	Purchase	1916	346.4 sq km
Diego Garcia	Lease	1966	30 sq km
Kwaj	Lease	1983 Compact of Free Association 2004 Amended Compact	16 sq km

In the game of *Monopoly* when a player lands on a property that is owned by another player the owner collects rent. Similarly, terrain can be leased by an imperial power as well as bought; however, the amount of the leased territory is typically less than when it is bought. Nor is this property frequently envisioned by the empire in question as being controlled by them for time immemorial, although sometimes exceptions occur. Nonetheless, notwithstanding an apparent obsession amongst scholars of the Mongol, Macedonian, British, Russian, and Roman empires over which empire was larger, expansion by lease cannot be overlooked purely by the duration of the lease or the size of the territory. As David bested Goliath in the *Old Testament*, size cannot always be conflated with global reach. Small polities like Singapore, Hong Kong, and Qatar are far more influential than many large states, e.g., Mongolia and Kazakhstan; and small patches of geography, e.g., Kashmir, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, what Rieber terms “shatter zones” (2014: 9), are often much more consequential than larger areas. It is, consequently, a mistake to dismiss leased empires simply because they are small. As Darwin contends:

I’m sceptical of the idea that the only empires worth the historian’s attention are ‘large’ ones – whatever that vague category means... not only are empires a much more universal phenomenon than is usually acknowledged but... they come in all shapes and sizes, and... the ‘small’ ones repay the historian’s enquiry (2013).

Empires survive on relationships of power between asymmetrical political actors. In the past British lands which were coloured red on a map were traditionally a sign of power. And many imperial powers celebrated their imperial status, e.g., the large stone wall maps Mussolini had commissioned in Rome to celebrate the re-birth of an Italian empire after his annexation of Ethiopia. These practises began to come to an end in the post-war 20th century as many powers sought to refute their imperial status. Empire, for many, had become a dirty word and great powers, including the United States and Russia, attempted to refute their taxonomy while simultaneously wanting to keep the unequal and advantageous power asymmetries they have obtained.

Nonetheless, despite assertions that short-lived empires such as Napoleonic France are “failed empires” that do not qualify as world powers because of their short shelf life (Münkler 2007: 9), we argue the contrary. Indeed, Alexander the Great’s empire might have lasted less than two decades but the *Diadochi* which succeeded him were to have an enduring legacy. Consequently, even short-lived and minor colonial possessions (in terms of territory) can play major roles in world history. Britain’s control of Hong Kong illustrates this point nicely. Unable to even consider controlling the vastness of Qing China, European empires carved out geographically small enclaves or concessions that hobbled the Chinese state. Bickers (2011:10) believes that contemporary Chinese leaders have not forgotten this trespass and claims that Beijing’s current foreign policy is, in part, moved by a desire to avenge its humiliation. As these leased concessions suggest we need to re-consider historical attitudes towards imperial longevity and size in addition to methods of expansion. Given the evolution of contemporary geopolitics the islands that dot the Pacific, bookended by the United States and China, are likely to be of increasing importance.

Leasing in Micronesia

The importance of short or small leases is easily demonstrable in American history. At the very beginning of the 20th century Washington ratified the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty and obtained France’s assets in what would become the Panama Canal (Hay-Bunau-Varilla 1903). Guantanamo Bay in Cuba is a much contested lease that gives the United States perpetual control over a key military installation after Washington’s victory in the Spanish American War in 1898. As Mauritius began negotiating independence post-World War Two the United Kingdom agreed to exchange Chagos for Mauritian independence in 1965 (Vine 2004: 120). London paid £3 million in compensation and an additional £650,000 to help cover the relocation expenses for residents of the

Chagos Islands who were resettled in Mauritius. The next year, the United States then leased Diego Garcia from the United Kingdom (Vine 2004: 12).

Although less well known than American bases elsewhere Washington holds long-term leases on Kwaj that last until 2066 and which may be extended until 2086. At first the story of United States intervention in the RMI is similar to that of its conquest of northern Mexico in the sense that its forces initially seized the island, albeit from its Japanese occupiers; then they appropriated the atoll, with United Nations agreement, for military use. By 1951 Kwaj's remaining inhabitants, many of whom had been cleared by the Japanese who also used the island as a military base, were removed to neighbouring Ebeye Island - which was not heavily populated at the time (Hirshberg 2012: 40). While seeking to release itself from direct control of the RMI, thus appearing to meet its United Nations obligations to encourage self-government, the U.S. simultaneously sought to maintain a military presence by re-negotiating a new form of treaty with what are today the FSM, the RMI, and the RP.¹ Thus the "Compacts of Free Association" (or CFAs) were born. Between 1986 and 1994, and following UN-observed plebiscites, the islands were given the option to vote for independence in return for: continued financial assistance until 2003 (\$579 US million went to the RMI alone) (Gootnick 2007: 1); the ability of all the islanders to work and reside in the United States; and the right for the United States to operate military bases within their territorial waters. In some ways, this process resembles the treaties that Washington inked with First Peoples in North America. In theory, the First Peoples were sovereign and could have refused, but in practice this was impossible. Given the economic dependency of some of the Pacific polities on the United States it is questionable if they actually had any real "choice" in these plebiscites. In essence the treaties and the plebiscites granted a veneer of respectability to an outcome that was virtually guaranteed.

It is at this point in the narrative that the leasing process *per se* starts to operate. With the RMI the United States additionally provided \$150 million US as a final settlement for any claims by Marshallese living on the Bikini, Enewetak, Ronelap, and Utrik islands as a result of the 67 nuclear tests which had been conducted in the area, without any local agreement or input, between 1946 and 1958. The amount was obtained on an estimated market *rental value* for the land from 1946-1958 (the testing period) and from 1958-2029 (the period of time which the islands are deemed to remain contaminated) (Lum, Thomas, Redhead, Bearden, and Lazzari 2006). During one of these tests, on March 1, 1954, an immense fireball accompanied by a twenty mile-high mushroom cloud appeared over the Bikini Island testing site; this was “the largest nuclear device ever detonated in the atmosphere by the USA” and a thousand times more powerful than the bomb dropped over Hiroshima (Friberg 2006: 132). While the 162 inhabitants of Bikini Atoll and the 142 persons living in neighbouring Enewetak Atoll had been relocated to Ebeye prior to the testing, one consequence of the explosion was the spread of radioactive fallout over the nearby inhabited atolls of Rongelap and Utrik. Their 239 inhabitants were then “forcibly removed” to Ebeye (Friberg 2006: 132), but not before experiencing “anoxia, vomiting, nausea, diarrhoea... skin and eye irritations... radiation burns...loss of hair... [and later] miscarriages and stillbirths” (Schwalbenberg 1985: 111). It has been estimated that if the total yield of the nuclear weapons tested in the RMI were spread out over the entire testing period it would be the equivalent of 1.6 Hiroshima bombs dropped every day for twelve years (Horowitz 2011).

As the CFA came to an end in 2004 an Amended Compact (AC) was negotiated between the United States and the RMI. This new agreement oversaw the United States continuing to provide economic assistance up to a figure of \$1.5 billion until 2023 (Gootnick 2007: 1). However, a “subsidiary government-to-government agreement” also saw the Department of Defense sign the aforementioned *extended lease* over Kwaj until 2086 (US Department of State, 2015). While the original

CFA in the RMI had significant local support (some 60% of the population were in favour according to the UN monitored plebiscite), and while many local inhabitants viewed this treaty as a means by which they could maintain independence while keeping strong economic ties with the United States, questions have been asked about the extent of this independence option. This is especially the case given that the Compact allows the United States “full authority” for security matters. To be sure, Friberg points out that 68% of the RMI’s government expenditure comes from the United States, thus making the nation aid dependent (2006: 124).

It was been suggested also that the majority of peoples living on Kwaj Atoll were opposed to the treaty, as were those impacted by the radiation tests who wanted further compensation (Schwalbenberg 1985: 105). One Bikini Islander, Tamaki Juda, said: “we are like the people of Israel. We wander in the desert... until the return of the promised land” (Schwartz 2008). Additionally, there are disputes over land ownership on Kwaj and the amounts being awarded (Gootnick 2007: 3). The fact that roughly one quarter of all RMI islanders today, circa 24,000 people, reside in the United States, is also a Janus-shaped concern. On the one hand, it suggests that the United States has honoured its CFA obligations by offering economic mobility to an otherwise aid-dependent and resource-poor population. On the other hand, there are potentially inadvertent echoes for the RMI of what happened to the inhabitants on Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean who were induced by the United Kingdom to leave to make way for a military base.

Blanken (2012:46) argues that many ignore the American empire because the United States has often sought economic rather than territorial gain. Ignatieff lumps these less conspicuous and informal attempts at empire together as “empire light” (2003). However, the CFAs with the RMI, FSM, and RP suggest that there is, using the previously discussed Savage formula, a level of formal control here given that the United States has full authority over all external security matters as well as *direct territorial governance* of Kwaj Atoll itself.

The CFA territories are not the only bases in this part of the world to be controlled directly by the United States in this manner. The United States captured Guåhån the Spanish American War when the warship *Charleston* arrived and shelled a Spanish fortress. Shortly after Guåhån was *de facto* purchased and much of the island's territory was forcibly bought or leased from its indigenous Chamorro inhabitants by way of "domain land condemnation proceedings" (Quimby 2011: 361). Some 11,000 Chamorros (roughly half the island's indigenous population) were "displaced" (Quimby 2011: 361). Given that land ownership in Guåhån is a symbol of identity and authority and that the First Peoples there control only about one quarter of the remaining land (the rest is in private non-Chamorro hands), its removal is politically telling.

Historically the issue of control of Guåhån is of major military significance since the acquisition of this base helped to kick-start the entire overseas base-building process, which today sees U.S. installations of one kind or another in *circa* one hundred different nations, and with their military controlling through leases some 720,000 acres (roughly 1800 kilometres) of strategically important land globally (Lutz 2010). Yet in general texts dealing with United States, Spanish, or German history these Pacific islands receive scant mention. Even in broad imperial history books the Pacific, outside of Australia and New Zealand, is frequently over-looked. Burbank and Cooper, for example, do not discuss German interests in the region at all and the only mention Spain usually gets is in relation to the Philippines. The reasons for this are complex but certainly reflect a general Western and Anglophone tendency to focus on its own history at the expense of others.

The significance of the story of American imperialism in the Pacific does not end here, however. There are additional signifiers of a neo-imperial relationship. Firstly, although the RMI is supposed to be represented by U.S. embassy officials overseas there is little mention of that nation officially, at least on the London embassy website. Indeed, during a telephone enquiry in order to ascertain who represents the RMI's interests in the United Kingdom the embassy operator assumed we were inquiring about "marshall arts" and proved unable to identify a relevant contact. In addition to a

possible lack of political representation internationally the Marshallese who work on Kwaj live on neighbouring Ebeye, an island some 6.5 kilometres away and a twenty-minute commute by boat. Kwaj is reserved for the two thousand or so United States military personnel and their civilian staff (*States News Service* 2009). While the base has all the *accoutrements* of suburban American life, including a golf course, swimming pool, baseball pitch, basketball court, pools, a bowling alley, a fitness centre, paved roads, and detached two-storey houses with well-manicured lawns, and was deliberately designed as a utopian suburban space (it was once referred to as “a tropical *Leave it to Beaver*”) (Hirschberg 2012: 41), Ebeye is its Mr. Hyde opposite. The latter, with its 15,000 population, is a small polluted island whose inhabitants have no running water, infrequent electricity, and live in run-down shacks (Walsh 1999). There are startling parallels here with the contrasts to be found in the former United States controlled Canal Zone, with its “swimming pools, golf courses, parks, social clubs... and schools”, and the “destitution” to be found outside the former Zone (Sigler 2016). Kwaj’s land area is 3.1 km², Ebeye’s is a mere one-third of a square kilometre, making it “more crowded than Hong Kong” (Vltchek 2013: 102, 104). While the United States does pay rent for Kwaj it appears that the funds go direct to Majuro, the capital of the RMI, or a handful of very wealthy absentee Kwaj landowners (Vltchek 2013: 102).

Furthermore, the methods by which the inhabitants on Kwaj were moved to Ebeye and the way in which other RMI inhabitants joined them, mirror events on Diego Garcia and the forced removal of the Chagossians, which was justified on the basis that they were not native to the region and had been imported to work on the plantations. A United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) legal advisor Tony Aust, when recommending policy on Diego Garcia, suggested to “maintain the fiction that the inhabitants of Chagos are not a permanent or semi-permanent population” (Snoxell 2008: 123). Such a stance is a modern version of *Terra Nullius* and ignores the historical fact that the Chagos’s ancestors had been living there as long as British settlers had in New Zealand. The Chagossians subsequently resorted to the courts. Yet in spite of the fact that the British High Court

called their removal illegal, a 2008 Law Lords' decision denied them the right of return on the basis that compensation had been agreed. Once again the fiction of legal payment had become the basis of dispossession. Intriguingly, a similar judicial debate during the George Bush Jr. presidency emerged over compensation claims paid by the United States to RMI islanders affected by nuclear testing.

Another neo-imperial warning light, this time in Guåhån's case, is a continuing lack of political representation. Following payment to Spain the island was ruled directly by the Department of the Navy on the basis that it was, according to the Supreme Court's *Downes v Bidwell* (1901) decision, inhabited by "alien races, differing... in religion..." (Kinzer 2006: 103). It was conveniently overlooked that the Chamorro had converted to Roman Catholicism following centuries of Spanish occupation. In order to begin addressing a lack of democratic accountability Guåhån was made an 'unincorporated territory' in 1950 through the Organic Act, wherein some local self-government was permitted. It was only in 1968 that the inhabitants won the right to elect their own governor. In 1995 the Office of Insular Affairs was created to oversee United States policy in American Samoa, the US Virgin Islands, the CNMI, and Guåhån; but even today: "...people born in Guam ...can't vote for President; they have only one, nonvoting representative in Congress, and Congress can overturn any law passed by Guam's legislature" (Paik 2012: 26).

Conclusion

A number of key concerns surround instances of these imperial leases and purchases. Firstly, how are ontological presuppositions such as differing ideas about land tenure being addressed? When the British Crown and Māori *rangatira* (chiefs) signed *Te Tiriti* (the Treaty of Waitangi) in 1840 Europeans assumed land "was property to be bought and sold" (Salmond 2012: 127). Māori, on the other hand, viewed land as "owned by all the people to be used communally and individually and not to be possessed" (Puketapu 1966). Secondly, who is doing the signing on behalf of the peripheral territory, a legitimate representative or a proxy? In the 1860s when the British Governor of New

Zealand purchased land in the Waitara district of the North Island from a dissident *rangatira*, a deal which a more senior chief opposed, it became the prelude to the Taranaki War. A similar disagreement over property ownership faces the islanders of Ebeye. Thirdly, are these agreements being settled co-operatively between equal states, or are some parties placed under duress? As Lipson warns: “it is hard to distinguish a forced sale from a freely negotiated one” (1985: 25). Indeed, recent U.S. federal court cases have confirmed that many Chamorro in Guåhån had their lands taken unjustly and some restitution followed (Quimby 2011: 375). However, even if the matter is decided democratically and at the local level, the fact that the Chamorro have become a minority on their own land (they make up roughly 37 per cent of the island’s population as a result of massive immigration from the U.S., the Philippines and other Pacific Islands), and have few economic choices, suggests a form of coercion (Quimby 2011: 361). The United States, nevertheless, is not the only power to purchase and lease territory and then refuse to acknowledge its imperial nature. Students of the Mediterranean would recognize the similarity between Washington’s arrangement in Cuba and London’s position in contemporary Cyprus (Glenny 2000: 616). Russia too cloaks its imperial actions, notably in the Ukraine, by way of ruses known as *maskirovka* (tactical deception or denial). These non-American examples demonstrate again the universal significance of the issues being addressed for current security concerns.

Maier (2002) and Ferguson (2002) both note that the United States is unwilling to recognize that it is an imperial power. This work makes plain that Washington is, indeed, imperial, and that the United States has regularly relied on a wide range of imperial instruments – including *direct territorial control* through purchase and lease. Moreover, this research suggests that it remains difficult to perfectly demarcate empire from other, more universal forms of political organization, e.g., hegemony and nation states, and that attention should also be given to small territories and to empires which do not necessarily last for thousands of years. Indeed, the Third Reich lasted a mere

twelve years rather than one thousand yet no-one would deny its catastrophic impact. While everyone readily recognizes empires that are forged on the battlefield a strict adherence to this definition would rule out other empires and would promote taxonomic clarity at the expense of understanding better this rich and varied phenomenon. Although attempts to find a single, unified definition of empire may be unrealistic at present, this work suggests that empires may be both formal and informal. Thus, imperial control may be attained through a variety of tactics, including war, threat of war, and other forms of overt blackmail or intimidation. Like the act of colonial settlement itself, these are some of “the most spectacular” modes of imperialism, but they are by no means the only ones (McLeod 2000: 8). Other more subtle methods, such as legal arrangement (treaties and land swaps), collusion, marriage, economic dependence, cultural ties, and purchase or lease, can be just as effective.

This work happily concedes, therefore, that expansion via purchase and lease is not the sole mechanism by which empires expand. Moreover, it does not suggest that American leaders carefully devised a cunning plan of expansion by acquisition. Washington sometimes simply capitalized on the opportunity to purchase or lease land from other polities. Indeed, it is worth remembering that Thomas Jefferson’s representatives originally only wanted increased American rights along the Mississippi but ended up making the Louisiana Purchase in an unexpected deal. Nor do we suggest that such purchases or leases always have to be destructive or unequal. As Price points out: “Our historiography of the imperial encounter has been so focused on the (very real) asymmetrical power relations that evolved that we have not properly appreciated the expectation of more benign outcomes” (2015). The 2014 example of Kiribati purchasing 6000 acres of land on Vanua Levu in Fiji to secure food security and a future home as sea levels rise is a case in point. As the President of Fiji, Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, proclaimed: “You will be able to migrate with dignity. The spirit of the people of Kiribati will not be extinguished... Fiji will not turn its back on our neighbours” (2014). Finally, this work does not assume that imperial powers only rely on a single method of expansion. Indeed,

successful empires usually combine various including familiar and easily recognizable approaches like conquest and annexation, as well as less visible tactics like purchase and lease. Although this piece has focused on Micronesia, a broader look at Washington's place in the Pacific *writ large* illustrates that the U.S. has expanded its influence via multiple, varied, and overlapping approaches, ranging from formal, constitutional, and conspicuous to purchase and lease.

What this research highlights is that the practice of buying and leasing territory is not an outlier and is hugely significant to both our understanding of the Pacific in the 21st century and to the ways in which empires operate. Firstly, the amount of territory involved is noteworthy. The combined land purchases made by the United States and Canada, for example, are larger than most of the well-known empires in world history. Secondly, many of these imperial territories, as the cases of Kwaj and Guåhån demonstrate, are still part of an intact empire, while many of the more recognizable European empires of the past two centuries, e.g., German or Italian, were quite short-lived. Thirdly, such imperial transactions, many of which are Pacific centred, shaped the evolution and direction of a number of contemporary modern states. It was these early and small German acquisitions in the RMI, nearly a decade before it took formal control of Namibia which has traditionally been seen as the start date of the Second Reich, which helped to set that nation state on its course of imperial expansion. Similarly, U.S. involvement in Guåhån became the building block of later base acquisitions all over the globe. Likewise, America's nuclear testing programme on Kwaj was to have immense Cold War importance. It is with some irony, therefore, that the term Micronesia, the 19th century European appellation given to this region in the Pacific, means "tiny islands"; for as the history of U.S. involvement suggests the role of this part of the world is anything but insignificant, demonstrating again the need to re-think attitudes both towards size and the Pacific. Fourthly, a focus upon empire in this region underlines the tragic fact that since the formal arrival of the Spanish and up to today the entire modern history of the RMI and Guåhån appears to be one solely of imperial control. Fifthly, while this process of territorial expansion appears to have reached its

zenith in a previous age, the Pacific examples identified here suggest that the phenomenon continues. Last but not least, this process of territorial acquisition seems so successful that many have ignored these clearly imperial processes and instead focused on more visible forms of empire.

When the European explorer Magellan first came into contact with Guåhån in 1521 he called the islands “Los Ladrones”, or Islands of Thieves, on account of the fact that local Chamorro culture was communal, with the result that the islanders helped themselves to anything not tied down (Owen 2010: 307). This paper, however, asks ‘who are the real thieves?’, suggesting that Proudhon’s assertion that “property is theft” is not too far off the mark when it comes to some First Peoples’ scenarios and land sales. It is no surprise perhaps that Immanuel Kant, in his *Preliminary Articles For Perpetual Peace Among States* (1795), expressly stated that “A state is not... a piece of property”, and as such should not “Come under the Dominion of Another State by Inheritance, Exchange, *Purchase* [our italics] or Donation”.

Sceptics of empire abound, especially in the context of the United States (Motyl 2006), while others (Mallaby 2002) claim that empire is resurgent. The American experience of imperialism highlighted here differs from the latter in arguing that not only is the United States an imperial power but that the ‘imperial moment’ never actually went away - it was always there – but just disguised. Like Gallagher and Robinson’s assertion that the so-called ‘New Imperialism’ of the post-1880s British World was not that new but rather ongoing, we argue that there has been “a continuity of policy” here too (1953: 8), in this case by purchase and lease. Like the British Empire, which “worked to establish and maintain British paramountcy by whatever means best suited the circumstances of their diverse regions of interest” (Gallagher and Robinson 1953: 12), the same holds true for the United States. Thus ‘*The Island of Thieves*’ casts doubt on the idea that empires are no longer conceivable. Like some postcolonial calls for greater attention to be given to certain geographical

anomalies, such as military bases and concessions (Sigler 2016), this research forces us to begin rethinking not only definitions of the term empire but also the relationship between imperial history, the United States, and Micronesia. In identifying the continuing imperial processes in this region of the world our work underlines the fact that the so-called 'winds of change' seem to have come to an abrupt halt at the Pacific Gyre. The Gyre is that great ocean current in the southern ocean which runs *counter-clockwise* to ocean currents elsewhere in the world; as such it appears to be a particularly symbolic boundary for signifying certain parts of the Pacific which remain isolated from post-colonial developments elsewhere.

The law locks up the man or woman
Who steals the goose from off the common
But leaves the greater villain loose
Who steals the common from off the goose.
(17th century protest against enclosure)

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