

## AMERICAN SAMOA: Which Road Ahead?

by James Bishop<sup>1</sup>

Seven tropical islands 2,400 miles southwest of Hawaii, American Samoa, was annexed by the United States at the turn of the century during America's brief imperial phase. Left largely to themselves throughout fifty years of naval administration, inhabitants of the territory preserved their traditional culture until the 1960s. Then greatly increased spending by an embarrassed U.S. government brought affluence and social change. Respect for traditions hallowed by a three-thousand year history, and unwillingness to jeopardize their federal subsidy, kept American Samoans behind their neighbors in moving toward self-government. But by 1976, an economic crisis and dissatisfaction with the behavior of recent appointed governors finally persuaded Samoans to approve what they had rejected in three earlier plebiscites--the election of their own governor.

Local issues, primarily economic and social, are expected to dominate the gubernatorial campaign this year. The voters are split roughly in two groups. Those who favor the old style politics of family and regional contests for the honor of electing a member or ally to prestigious position are pitted against modernists who are more concerned about the competence and impartiality of the candidates. As American Samoans move toward responsible government they are united in their opposition to independence and little attracted by the possibility of reunification with Western Samoa. Statehood is viewed as impractical. Commonwealth status has appeal, but the incompatibility of the U.S. constitution with essential elements of Samoan culture is an impediment.

Since the early sixties the stated policy of the U.S. Government has been to respect the political wishes of the American Samoan people. On November 18, 1976, this commitment was expressed in the following terms by the U.S. spokesman during the Fourth Committee's discussion of American Samoa at the United Nations General Assembly:

<sup>1</sup>James Bishop, a representative of the U.S. State Department, wrote the following report this year as a result of his research in the Samoan communities on the U.S. mainland, in Hawaii, and in both American and Western Samoa. Besides the standard printed works on Samoa, Mr. Bishop personally interviewed a large number of important and concerned individuals in the above mentioned areas. The results of all these interviews were then compiled into a report for a Senior Seminar in Foreign Policy sponsored by the U.S. State Department. His candid and forthright discussion of American Samoa's problems and future warrant its publication in our journal.

The United States is fully aware and freely acknowledges the obligation regarding non-self governing territories which it administers specified in Chapter 11 of the United Nations Charter, and the U.S. is fully committed to the principle of self-determination.<sup>2</sup>

Simultaneously, as has been described, the United States has furnished sufficient economic assistance to enable American Samoans to enjoy a substantial improvement in their standard of living. While many Samoans resent the obvious skepticism of some Interior and Government of American Samoa (GAS) officials that they will be able to manage their own affairs, and Interior is not yet willing to allow the Samoans unsupervised control of the funds flowing from Washington, no Samoan complains that the U.S. is blocking movement toward self-government or has been stingy in recent years.

The subsidy from Washington currently amounts to \$45 million annually, approximately \$1,500 for each resident of American Samoa, almost half of whom are aliens. With the possible exception of phosphate rich Nauru, per capita Gross National Product (GNP) consequently is much higher than elsewhere in Polynesia. There is universal free education through secondary school, and a community college in which 900 of the territory's 30,000 residents are enrolled. Each school-child is eligible for two free meals a day. The elderly can receive social security pensions and one free meal a day. Everyone in the territory has access to free medical care at the best hospital in Polynesia and at dispensaries located throughout the Islands. GAS employs 10% of the population, which, given the median age of fifteen, means the majority of the adult work force. Import duties are levied on only a handful of products, and less than 10% of the population pays income taxes. There are approximately 3,000 privately-owned vehicles in a territory with only seventy-six square miles of terrain, most of it mountainous. Ninety-six percent of the population has access to the 3,800 privately-owned television sets, and over a third of the territory's residents watch television in color.

The problems which call for some redefinition of policy are not those of neglect but of administration. Development and the manner in which it was undertaken have created a new set of problems, and the response by all concerned has been inadequate. These major problems are:

1) Out-migration: The estimates vary widely, but a conservative figure for the number of American Samoans now in Hawaii and West

<sup>2</sup> Statement made by Jay Kenneth Katzen on American Samoa, November 18, 1976, U.S. Mission to the United Nations.

Coast states is 45,000. This is almost three times the number residing in the islands. Samoans leave home primarily because they perceive better economic and educational opportunities in Hawaii and the mainland. Others are attracted by what they know of U.S. life styles. Several sub-problems exist under this rubric. They are:

First, Maladjustment. Poor English and little vocational education back home make it difficult for Samoans to find work. They also experience the disorientation common when members of communal societies find themselves in the impersonal environment of a modern city. Samoans are very physical people, and this tendency, when combined with frustration and alcohol, leads frequently to brawling and custody. These same problems recently have led some Samoans into organized crime. By misfortune or intent, many Samoan migrants eventually apply for welfare payments.

Secondly, Brain Drain. The majority of male high school students not going on to college enlists in one of the U.S. military services. The Army takes 200-300 per annum and maintains a recruiting office in American Samoa. Many of the enlistees extend their commitments, a substantial portion remaining twenty years in the service. A high percentage of those Samoans receiving college degrees seek employment in the United States after deciding that GAS salaries are not competitive or that promotion within GAS will be too slow.

Thirdly, Agricultural Production Falling. A rural exodus fuels this migration, draining men off the land. Food imports, many of non-traditional varieties, are replacing local production.

Fourth, Labor Shortage. Although the unemployment rate is estimated by GAS to be 16%, lack of an adequate labor force limits production at the canneries. American Samoans prefer to seek employment in Hawaii and the West Coast rather than accept the lower wages paid for the unattractive task of cleaning fish. Samoans also are unwilling to tolerate the primitive living conditions and long absences from home endured by the Koreans and Chinese who man the two hundred fishing boats which supply the canneries. For American Samoa this means a substantial loss in potential upstream benefits from the canning industry.

2) Another major problem facing Samoa is that of in-migration. According to GAS figures from a 1974 census, American Samoa's estimated 30,000 population then included 14,704 aliens; 13,667 of these foreigners were Western Samoans. Their labor is essential for the canneries where Western Samoans comprise roughly half the work force. However, they drain the economy of several million dollars per year, which is mailed home to their families, and few earn enough to pay in-

come taxes. Nevertheless, Western Samoans enjoy most of the social benefits received by American Samoans. They comprise 17% of the public school population and frequently come to Pago Pago for the purpose of obtaining free medical care.

Recent revision of New Zealand's visa procedures is believed by unskilled Western Samoans to have choked off their entry to the New Zealand labor market.<sup>3</sup> Given this perception, the American Samoan economy can be expected to attract even more Western Samoans, some of whom eventually will join the Samoan communities in Hawaii and the western states. Currently ineligible to vote or to hold public office, Western Samoans resident in American Samoa may constitute too large a portion of the population to accept political impotence docilely when greater self-government becomes a reality in American Samoa.

Other expatriates include Tongans, for whom there is historic ill will dating back to the years before the arrival of the Europeans when warriors from Tonga conquered Samoa. With the Tongan economy in the doldrums, and few other outlets for the islands' rapidly expanding population, American Samoa can expect more Tongans to seek admission and employment. The most recent emigrant group is drawn from oriental fishermen who have married Samoans and established themselves in business. Cultural antipathy toward Asiatics and business competition suggest these Orientals eventually may find their status precarious.

3) The deficient education system poses another problem. The attempt to use ETV to hurdle the barriers to rapid development of a quality educational system has not met Samoan expectations. Regardless of the reasons stated--some Samoans believe the entire scheme was a mistake in which their children were used as guinea pigs, while others state that ETV could have accomplished its objectives if given more time and support by teachers and politicians--it is a fact that the average reading comprehension of applicants for admission to the community college is at the fifth grade level. In 1976, only 25% of the candidates for admission to U.S. colleges scored well enough in the test of English for foreigners to merit further consideration.

In the view of many technically qualified persons, including some senior members of the Education Department, the principal flaw has been reliance on English as the language of instruction throughout the school system. Few Samoan teachers were fluent in English when ETV was introduced. Samoan children were and are discouraged from speak-

<sup>3</sup> The New Zealand government says it intends to accept over a thousand Western Samoan emigrants per annum and is establishing procedures to facilitate the temporary employment of Western Samoans. The New Zealanders also point out that thousands of Western Samoan "over-stayers" are being allowed to regularize their status.

ing English at home. Imperfect English makes it very difficult to transmit course content in other subjects. Belatedly, an effort is being made to introduce more Samoan into the schools, with use of the vernacular increasingly emphasized in the early years.

4) Growth without Development. American Samoa is a textbook example of a state growing in terms of per capita GNP without becoming more self-reliant. In fact, as the U.S. subsidy has grown, so also have American Samoa's dependence and vulnerability. There is no serious development plan. Investment priorities reflect the preferences of the governors, none of whom in recent years has had any background in economic development. Not only direction but thrust has varied with the governors. Haydon accelerated public spending, while Ruth and Barnett have sought to economize. In the opinion of some Samoan businessmen, the frequent shifts in GAS priorities have been a major deterrent to outside investment.

The phantom of industrialization has captured the imagination of several governors, but the territory's industrial park stands largely vacant, a mute reminder of American Samoa's distance from both raw materials and markets, as well as of the shortage of vocationally-educated workers. Tourism's potential has been exaggerated by those who ignore the territory's climate and modest attractions. Basic services, e.g. water and power, have been poorly managed. Despite almost 200 inches of rainfall per annum, as well as the investment of over \$8 million in recent years, water shortages limit production at the canneries and have compelled their closure. As these plants are by far the major employers in the private sector, and they provide the largest portion of local government revenue, their needs for water, power (despite the installation of army generators to cover a shortage which developed several years ago, there are frequent outages), and a marine railway staffed to handle demand have not received sufficient attention. The *Fono* (legislative assembly) has been as unsystematic as GAS in its approach to development, frequently adopting a pork-barrel attitude toward public investment.

5) Swollen Bureaucracy. There is an enormous amount of government in American Samoa. As mentioned earlier, GAS employs 10% of the population. This polity of 30,000 has almost two score legislators whose salaries and expenses consume \$500,000 in public revenue. The Governor's office costs almost an equal amount to run. GAS recruits by newspaper advertisement and occasionally by placement of friends of the governor or of the administration in power. Most of those hired have no experience with the frustrations of life in a developing country environment. Almost no GAS contract personnel speak Samoan. Their

turnover rate is high, and social relations with their Samoan colleagues frequently are stiff.

6) Disorientation. Predictably, the process of modernization has undermined adherence to traditional values. Consensus has given way to some polarization on generational lines, but the impact has been too ragged to describe so neatly. Some young Samoans have returned from the United States with an ethnic consciousness which glorifies the traditional system many of their peers would abolish. The award of *matai* titles removes some of the reformers from the debate. Some influential Samoans advocate policies regarding *fa'Samoa* which are inconsistent.<sup>4</sup> Dissatisfaction is not limited to the young--many older Samoans advocate restricting the power of the *matai*. Meanwhile, some high chiefs call for restoration of the greater powers they once exercised.

The Education Department encourages traditional arts and handicrafts, but it does not suggest to teachers how they respond to questions about the obvious conflict between the political equality of the American model and the privileges embodied in the *matai* system. The Office of Samoan Affairs promotes traditional sports but it has not defined the desirable blend of Samoan and modern mores. In fact, no one in the Samoan community has proposed a formula which has won wide acceptance.

Conclusion. The urgency and magnitude of more vital issues have left little time for senior U.S. Government officials to focus on American Samoa's problems. Benign neglect and *fa'samoa's* flexibility preserved the integrity of Samoan folkways during the initial phase of western impact. But the equalitarian ideal and the seductive influence of American affluence now prompt many Samoans to reject much of *fa'Samoa*. A culture with a three-thousand-year history is being abandoned by a people who will live an uncomfortable length of time at the margin of the society many find more attractive. As long as the federal subsidy remains generous, those in American Samoa will enjoy a standard of living quite satisfactory from a material standpoint. But even for those in the islands, the psychic costs of cultural conflict are becoming evident in higher incidents of hypertension, suicide, etc. Samoans in the slums of Hawaii and the West Coast suffer both material and emotional deprivation. There is a worrisome possibility that a portion of the Samoan community eventually might follow the American Indian down the path to cultural disintegration and alcohol-laced despair.

U.S. interests in American Samoa are insignificant from any national perception. However, commitments to the Samoan people, and

<sup>4</sup> Uncertainty and ambiguity are compounded by the fact that Samoans differ considerably in their interpretation of the content of *fa'Samou*.

international undertakings oblige the United States to search with greater imagination and energy for a humane resolution of the dilemma which appears to make prosperity and cultural integrity mutually exclusive. Federal spending can aggravate the problems it is intended to resolve and, as American Samoa's experience illustrates, create new and more serious challenges to the well-being of those it is intended to assist. The scarce resources are attention, sensitivity and imagination. These must be forthcoming if the United States is to discharge conscientiously its obligations to the Samoan people. They must be allowed to assume rapidly greater responsibility for management of their own affairs, with the recognition that their performance may be as spotty as that of many youthful polities.

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