

Contesting Sovereignty Over Pacific Islands During WWII

Written by Matthew A. Hill

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MATTHEW A. HILL, JUL 20 2012

Can you help me develop my ideas on a piece I am working on? It comes out of my project *Atlantic Archive: UK-US Relations in an Age of Global War 1939-1945*. Although a historical paper on the Brits and Yanks throwing their respective toys out of the pram, the aim is to link it to more contemporary UK-US relations.

In 1977 Ruth Megaw published an article in the *Journal of Historical Studies* examining great power rivalry between Britain and the United States during the 1930s. Discussing the sovereignty of various Pacific Islands, including Canton and Enderbury, she mapped out how the rivalry was taking place. The catalyst for this rivalry was the expansion of civil and military aviation. The British and US militaries recognised the importance of having naval and air bases in order to attain force projection in areas not previously reachable. Both governments embarked on a series of investigations into the suitability of various islands as bases, sparking off a decade of dispute. Compounding this rivalry was the intense competition between commercial aviation companies for international routes. The Pacific Islands would be essential refuelling stops for transpacific travel connecting New Zealand and Australia to Hawaii and the mainland USA. With the American-owned Pan-Am securing landing rights in New Zealand in 1935, the British government attempted unsuccessfully to secure landing rights for British or dominion airlines to land in Hawaii.

Since this article was published, there have been no major investigations into this Pacific Island-situated rivalry. And since 1990, scores of previously unseen British government documents have been released and deposited in the UK National Archives that provide greater insight into these events. I am researching and writing an article that both adds greater detail to Megaw's examination of British and American rivalry whilst also expanding the scope to include 1939-1945. Because Megaw's work ended its discussion in 1939, it left unanswered whether the UK and the US were able to accommodate each others' imperial designs, particularly during a time of global conflict. How did, for example, the two nations implement joint administration of Canton and Enderbury Islands? Did Britain ever secure landing rights for British or dominion-owned airlines in Hawaii? Expanding the time-frame will also enable an examination of the impact that the December 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour had on issues between the two states being resolved.

The focus of this research has broad intellectual significance because it looks at a case-study of an area of conflict between two allied partners within a time of larger global conflict. It shows how local and global conflicts affect the dynamics of a particular alliance between two states. It examines in greater detail these disputes between the various government and commercial actors and situates this rivalry within the contemporary global arena; a time when the British government was conscious not to exacerbate tensions due to its keenness for the Americans to support it against Germany. With international arbitration being floated by Britain as one potential resolution to this rivalry, the damage in relations was real. If arbitration had happened before December 1941 then Germany and other nations could exploit this as a wedge between democracies, and domestically US public opinion towards the UK would have been low, and at a time when it most needed US support. Therefore, this research will not only deepen our understanding of the rivalry between the US and Great Britain over the Pacific Islands, but will also examine the broader balance between alliance and antagonism of these two nations in a time of shifting global tensions.

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Your thoughts, suggestions and ideas greatly appreciated.

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Read more from Matthew A. Hill in his e-IR blog, Reflections on American Politics from an Outsider

About the author:

Matthew A. Hill is a senior lecturer in International Relations at Anglia Ruskin University. The aim of this blog is to examine US politics and pick an idea not fully-formed and run with it to see where it goes. Sometimes it will wither away but other times it will inspire to think about the idea further. Your input is encouraged and welcomed.