

TRUBLE IN PARADISE

On July 30 the New Hebrides, a group of some 80 islands and 112,000 people in the Southwest Pacific, is to become independent after 74 years of joint British-French rule. These islands sheltered major elements of the U.S. Pacific Fleet during World War II, with 100,000 Americans based here. From here U.S. planes flew out to clear the skies over Guadalcanal, and from here U.S. Marines sailed to their rendezvous with victory and death at Tarawa.

With independence now fast approaching, the local political groups have been jockeying furiously to assume the mantle of power from the departing British and French. Dominant is the Vanuaaku Party which controls the present New Hebrides government under the British and French. Its leader is Walter Lini, who is also the government's Chief Minister. This Vanuaaku Party is left-wing socialist in orientation and owes some of its success to the substantial guidance and financial support it has received, overtly or otherwise, from Australian and New Zealand socialist circles, labor unions, from the World Council of Churches and others. The Vanuaaku Party and the government it controls operates from the capital at Port Vila on the southern island of Efate and seeks to extend its administrative sway throughout the New Hebrides.

The political opposition parties, scattered throughout the islands and collectively known as the "Moderates," oppose Vanuaaku centralization in favor of local autonomy. One of their most prominent spokesmen is Jimmy Stevens of the Na-Griamel Party, based on the big island of Espiritu Santo 175 miles north of Port Vila. Whereas Vanuaaku gets its international support from the socialist camp and local sympathy from the British, Stevens has received periodic assistance from a number of individual American and Australian entrepreneurs, and locally

from the French. Most prominent of the Americans has been Mike Oliver of Carson City, Nevada. Oliver is a survivor of two Nazi concentration camps and harbors a deep hatred of socialist centralism in any form, be it National Socialism, Moscow socialism or Vanuaaku socialism. He wants to see Espiritu Santo become a free-trade "Hong Kong" of the Southwest Pacific, under a libertarian constitution.

This New Hebrides pot has now come to a boil. After losing to the better organized and staffed Vanuaaku in the November 1979 elections, Jimmy Stevens announced that Espiritu Santo would secede. On May 28 some 600 of his followers, armed with bows, arrows and a few shotguns, seized the island and announced on June 3 a new provisional government under Jimmy Stevens. Walter Lini has responded by demanding that the British and French crush Stevens' secession movement by military force, and has threatened to call in "United Nations" help if they fail. Suddenly squabbles in the far-off New Hebrides, which the U.S. State Department has hitherto regarded as a British-French problem of little concern to the United States, may take on a larger significance. Someone may suddenly recall that Espiritu Santo was once a major naval base; that Soviet cruise ships out of Vladivostock via Sydney now visit there regularly; that the Vanuaaku Party used to describe itself in 1977 as a "Peoples Provisional Government" and its officials as "commissars;" that Vanuaaku has international socialist ties and could expect a sympathetic ear if, after independence on July 30, it called for foreign help in putting down Jimmy Stevens' anti-socialist uprising (which Vanuaaku has already been quick to brand as a right-wing American plot, although in fact Stevens has been threatening to secede for years on the issue of local autonomy.) In response to the Vanuaaku appeal

a small Cuban force could, for example, take over Espiritu Santo with modern weapons in a matter of hours. The Soviets could rapidly establish a permanent naval presence, if they chose to do so, in one of the great anchorages of the Southwest Pacific. Would France and Australia, the western powers most immediately affected, risk confrontation by intervening? This is ^{admittedly} a "worst case" scenario, but after Angola, Ethiopia, Afghanistan and the announced Brezhnev doctrine can it be ruled out? ^{similarly} Perhaps the New Hebrides, only now rediscovered by the U.S. press, should be regarded with greater attention.