There are often moments in time that help to shape individuals and countries. In the post-Second World War, pre-Vietnam Conflict period, one event, the question of West New Guinea, defined the United States-Australian relationship in Asia and the Pacific. Australia's foreign policy had traditionally relied on a strong Western presence to guarantee security, which included a military presence to thwart potential aggressors. When the Japanese defeated the United Kingdom military forces in the Far East with relative ease in 1941 and 1942, Australia began to look for another regional ally. The United States would prove to be the heir-apparent to the United Kingdom in the post-Second World War period. The forging of the United States-Australian partnership overcame several obstacles as each nation shaped its foreign policy strategies. Australia sacrificed its traditional ties with Britain in order to ensure a guarantee from the United States. In West New Guinea, the Australian Government attempted to bolster Dutch control and increase American support for the Netherlands while placating Indonesian demands for action and anxiety over continued Western colonialism. The United States attempted to limit the effects of communism in Indonesia while offering negligible support for the Netherlands in West New Guinea. The question of West New Guinea became a stage for United States-Australian relations, highlighting their common though sometimes conflicting goals of security and peace in South-East Asia.

From the turn of the twentieth century and through the World Wars, an Indonesian independence movement rallied around a Dutch-trained and educated Indonesian middle class. The collapse of the Netherlands during the Second World War bolstered Indonesian hopes that their new-found sovereignty would last into the postwar period. The years that followed saw periods of hostility and negotiation as the Indonesians and Dutch battled each other for land and political position. The 25 March 1947 Linggadjati Agreement established the Republic of the United States of Indonesia with a provision that any territory could join the new Federation by 'democratic process'. On 17 January 1948, the Renville Agreement concluded that the territories would remain under Dutch control for six to twelve months until the Netherlands transferred sovereignty to the Indonesian government. Neither agreement
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mentioned the future of West New Guinea. The 27 December 1949 Round Table Conference Agreement signed at The Hague between the Netherlands and Indonesia resulted in the Charter of Transfer of Sovereignty. The Netherlands transferred sovereignty of the East Indies territories to the Indonesians but insisted on excluding West New Guinea. Talks between the two countries failed to find a solution and in 1952 the Netherlands incorporated West New Guinea into its kingdom. Such a difference of opinion resulted from opposing interpretations of Article 2 of the Charter, which maintained New Guinea's status quo with the stipulation that negotiations begin within one year of the transfer of sovereignty to Indonesia. The Dutch, however, maintained that Article 2 did not include West New Guinea and therefore that the territory should remain in their possession. It is unclear why the Netherlands fought to retain the territory as it provided little in the way of economic benefits and caused great international controversy, mostly as the result of Indonesian President Sukarno's use of the issue to arouse nationalism and unite the different Indonesian factions.

The question of West New Guinea reaffirmed the difference in perspective between the United States and Australia regarding communism. For the United States, the communist threat continued to emanate from Moscow and the dispute with Indonesia was another battleground pitting the United States against the communist monolith, the Soviet Union. For Australia, whose major threat came from Peking, West New Guinea was more than another cold war battle. Even as Australia used the United States' cold war mentality to justify its position, Indonesia, due to its geographical proximity to Australia and its vital role in Japanese aggression during the Second World War, remained paramount in the strategic and political thinking during the crisis. Australia wanted a buffer between itself and the north, the only route for invading forces, and supported the Netherlands since it provided security and stability. Australia also had trusteeship over the east half of the island, and was to administer this territory until such a time that the indigenous population could take over. Indonesia, under the unpredictable and fiery nationalist Sukarno, was not as reliable a partner as the Netherlands. Thus, Australia continued its support for the Netherlands in West New Guinea, against American design and at the expense of international reputation, until it found another source of security in the buffer zone. When the United States provided this assurance in 1962, Australia abandoned the Netherlands. Australian actions remained consistent throughout the West New Guinea crisis—maintain an ally to the north who was strong enough to fend off any potential threat. It did not matter if the ally was the Netherlands or the United States, though the strengthening of United States relations was paramount in Australian strategy. The Australians were more than willing to arrive at a compromise over West New Guinea in 1962 once their strategic and security needs were fulfilled and guaranteed by the United States.

At the end of the Second World War, the United States placed Indonesia and the question of West New Guinea in 'cold storage'. The administration of Harry S. Truman, at this time, focused on Europe, specifically Greece and Turkey, and the Truman Doctrine. The situation was not critical and President Sukarno's nationalist forces had not begun to make a global impact. Truman's successor to the Presidency, Dwight D. Eisenhower, embraced a policy of strict neutrality in Indonesia. A fear that another country would fall to communism pervaded the
White House and State Department. After communist gains in China, Korea and Indochina, the Eisenhower Administration could not afford the loss of an estimated 80 million Indonesians. This constantly recurring concern guided the United States to a more pro-Indonesian policy, much to the dismay of Australia and the Netherlands. Indonesians generally admired the United States and its democratic values. Despite Sukarno’s rhetoric, he patterned Indonesia’s earlier efforts toward independence on American tradition and history. As an Indonesian Foreign Officer commented:

The British fleet made your Monroe Doctrine possible. The American fleet and the American air force, I suspect, are making our Independent Policy possible. Be as tolerant of our vanities as Great Britain was of yours.4

In many respects, this is what Eisenhower did during his tenure as President. As the British sought influence in the United States during the nineteenth century, the United States tried to influence the path Indonesia would take in the twentieth century.

The Australian government supported the Netherlands for many reasons. Publicly, it argued that Indonesia held neither legal claim to West New Guinea nor shared any common traits such as ethnic origin, language or culture. West New Guinea was separate from the Netherlands’s East Indies and in no way connected with the earlier agreements between the Dutch and the Indonesians. Privately, the Australians feared the possibility of a weak, or even communist-inspired, Indonesian government in the territory. They worried that a hostile force in West New Guinea, situated to the north of Darwin, and within bomber range, might use it as a base for hostile action against Australia. If the enemy controlled New Guinea’s air and sea bases, it could interdict allied forces and cut off communications with the West; this is what the Japanese had attempted during the Second World War.5 Australian policy on West New Guinea during the 1950s concerned itself with the preservation of Dutch hegemony and the moderation of Indonesian nationalism. The Australian goal was to rally the United States behind the Netherlands’ claim and preserve New Guinea from Indonesia while maintaining the cordial relationship the Australians held with Asian nations.

The Australian government was disappointed with the United States’ attitude towards West New Guinea. At the ninth and tenth session of the United Nations General Assembly, Indonesia had tried to place the question of West New Guinea on the agenda. While the Netherlands and Australia vehemently opposed this move, the allies could not persuade the United States to join them. Australian delegates to the General Assembly noted that the United States did not object to countries opposing Indonesian efforts but the Americans would not deviate from their policy. The United States’ concern was in arousing anti-American movements in Indonesia, avoiding objections by the African–Asian bloc and adhering to their traditional policy toward colonialism.6 Still, the Australian delegation to the United Nations and the Department of External Affairs remained positive about swaying the United States toward their view.7 United States Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, confirmed to the Australian ambassador to the United States, Percy Spender, that the United States had no
objection to the defeat of an Indonesian resolution in the United Nations although it could not actively see this through. He did not wish to disrupt the Indonesian government while it appeared to have a pro-Western stance. During a 14 September 1955 meeting with senior State Department officials, Australian Minister for External Affairs, Richard Casey, attempted to persuade the United States to his view, arguing that West New Guinea was an issue the Australian people regarded seriously. He called for American assistance in the United Nations but the response remained the same: there would be no change in policy that might ‘set things on fire’. The Australians would revisit this same issue in 1956 and 1957 with similar results. The primary aim of United States’ foreign policy in Asia remained the containment of communism, which outweighed the significance of West New Guinea. American strategy followed this line until 1958, when dissidents in Western Sumatra supported by the Central Intelligence Agency, organised a rebellion against Sukarno. The March 1958 revolt received the support of many senior Indonesian military and political leaders, but they were not able to withstand the efficient response by the Indonesians whose army quickly repelled the revolution. The United States hoped to exploit the division between Sukarno and former Indonesian prime minister Mohammad Hatta and encouraged dissidents in Central and Western Sumatra to break with the central government. The failed coup, however, reinforced Sukarno’s suspicions of the United States and further weakened the United States’s ‘carrot-and-stick’ approach to its Indonesian policy. Casey, clearly concerned with Indonesia and the American position, publicly revealed his anxiety over communist strength in Indonesia and the consequences for Australia, insisting that neither Australia nor SEATO would intervene in the crisis though it postponed plans for a medical school in Sumatra under the Colombo Plan. The prospects of civil war in Sumatra offered the potential for communists to capitalise on the confusion and increase their influence over the government, but Casey was more concerned with the possibility of full-fledged civil war. The failure of the dissidents in Sumatra left few choices. The Australians continued to exert their limited influence on the United States, hoping for curtailment of military equipment for Indonesia but expecting no major policy change. The efficiency with which the Indonesian government defeated the rebellion in Sumatra worried the Australians. With the failure of the Sumatra rebellion, the United States dramatically changed its position in Indonesia and with Sukarno. The United States lifted its embargo on the sale of military weapons and, in March 1958, installed a new ambassador to Indonesia, Howard P. Jones. The general mood within the Eisenhower administration was that the United States only had influence in the Indonesian army. Support, or the lack of condemnation, of the rebels in Sumatra had damaged this influence. American strategic thinking thus changed to encourage the only element with which it possessed any real leverage.

As a result, the Australian Cabinet faced two central issues in 1958: the consequences of United States military assistance to Indonesia and a proposed military pact with the Netherlands. At a 3 June 1958 Cabinet meeting, Casey emphasised that Australia must impress upon the United States the significance of military aid it gave Indonesia. He did not oppose a moderate amount of weaponry, in fact he encouraged such support for General Abdul Haris Nasution, Indonesian Army Commander-in-Chief and principal opponent to communist
organisations. Casey and the Cabinet believed the United States, alone, could influence Indonesia’s course in West New Guinea. If the United States supplied arms used only for internal security, and regulated the flow of offensive material to Indonesia, then Sukarno could not use these weapons against the Dutch. Australian ambassador to the United States Howard Beale cabled the same advice to Casey on 6 June 1958, suggesting ANZUS as a forum in which the Australians could urge the United States to formulate a strategy to combat the possibility of an Indonesian attack on West New Guinea. He believed the Indonesian efficiency in Sumatra would help Dulles see the necessity, even though the Secretary of State belittled the likelihood of an invasion. 

On 12 August 1958, the Australian Cabinet met to discuss the situation. Casey’s purpose, however, was to get the Cabinet to endorse the line he would take with the Dutch, British and the United States. The main concerns for the Cabinet were Indonesian aggression and a military agreement between Australia and the Netherlands in case of hostilities. The review of Australia’s reasons for supporting the Netherlands in West New Guinea emphasised the consequence of Indonesia’s control of the territory. Indonesia’s political instability remained paramount in Australian thinking, but the Cabinet also expressed apprehension about the interests of the indigenous inhabitants under Dutch control as well as the administration and development of the Australian-controlled territory on the eastern side of the island. Cabinet submission 1312 and subsequent discussions demonstrated Australia’s overriding interest in external security but also the domestic progress of the territories under Australian administration. Australia, like the United States, saw nation-building as a measurable step toward stability and peace in the region. On the question of a defensive arrangement between the Australians and the Dutch, the Cabinet concluded, with Defence Committee advice, that Australia did not possess the ability to act without major allied support. The United States had to be militarily active in the defence of West New Guinea if Indonesia invaded and only then could Australia respond to Dutch appeals for assistance. The Cabinet instructed Casey to remind the Indonesians of the dire consequences aggression held but also to inform the Netherlands’ Foreign Minister Dr. Joseph Luns that a military agreement between the two countries would serve no good purpose. Instead, Casey focused his attention on making Eisenhower and Dulles assume a more dynamic interest in the future of West New Guinea.

At the 1 October 1958 ANZUS Council meeting, Dulles enumerated the United States’ thinking on West New Guinea which intertwined with the internal situation in Indonesia. United States policy in Indonesia, to date, had been a test to see how far it could go, and reaffirm the view that the United States could cause trouble in Indonesia if necessary. The United States wielded influence in Indonesia through the supply of weapons, Dulles argued, because it was far better that ‘Indonesia should be dependent upon us in that respect than dependent upon the Soviet Union or the Soviet bloc’. Another growing concern for Dulles was the real possibility that the Netherlands would withdraw from West New Guinea. A Dutch retreat would create a vacuum which might lead Sukarno away from the United States. Dulles strongly supported Australia’s main objective of keeping the Dutch in New Guinea because they would not yield to communist pressure; the United States, however, would not alter its neutrality.
‘Walking the tightrope’, a term Eisenhower introduced to explain United States foreign policy toward Indonesia, became more perilous when, on 5 July 1959, Sukarno announced that he was introducing ‘Guided Democracy’ into Indonesia. This idea sought to re-inspire Indonesians with nationalism, reduce intra-political bickering and stabilise the government. Sukarno criticised Western-oriented democracy, arguing that the Indonesian way was the better route. ‘Guided Democracy’ meant returning to the village concept of government, which included prolonged deliberations leading to consensus. For Sukarno, ‘Guided Democracy’ was a tool with which he could continue to control the people and leaders of the opposition.

The Australians supported the Dutch against international pressure to enter negotiations with the Indonesians, but Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies made it clear after his return from a world tour on 20 June 1960 that he now believed in the school of thought that advocated granting independence to colonies sooner rather than later. The Australians appeared to have softened their position on Indonesia and agreed to a peaceful transition for West New Guinea when both countries had reached a consensus. A result of this policy was an acceleration by the Dutch in preparing the indigenous people of West New Guinea for greater participation in governmental affairs.

The United States continued to have reservations about Sukarno, who was the key to a West New Guinea solution. Sukarno, whose memory of the Sumatra rebellion remained clear in his mind, had deep suspicions that the United States was trying to undermine his position despite its neutrality and military assistance to Indonesia. Sukarno could not understand why the Americans were neutral on a colonial issue when they ‘had won their independence through a struggle against colonialism’. He also told Ambassador Jones that Australia was a major obstacle in the return of West New Guinea but would not elaborate. While it is true that the United States did encourage General Nasution, it also respected Indonesia’s non-alignment policy and would support any non-communist government that promised economic and social progress for the Indonesian people. Sukarno was suspicious by nature and admitted that West New Guinea was an obsession.

1961 brought political changes to both the United States and Australia. John F. Kennedy defeated Eisenhower’s would be successor Richard Nixon to become the 35th President of the United States. The change from Republican to Democrat was not nearly as significant as the subtle change in the type of cold war warrior leading the country and State Department. The Australians were less cautious about the change in policy than they were about the transition between administrations. There was a consensus among political pundits that during the transition the United States voice would be muted when it should be the loudest. Australians still believed Indonesia was moving closer to military subversion in West New Guinea in order to precipitate a general uprising from which Sukarno could intervene and assume control of the territory. Casey reported to Beale on 20 December 1960 that the Dutch were overconfident in their ability to contain covert aggression and pointed to several instances where aggression had already occurred. There was a sense that Australia must rally the United States to the Dutch cause before Indonesia achieved its goals. Belligerent statements by Sukarno and Nasution increased these fears as did Nasution’s cancellation of his
visit to Australia so that he could go to the Soviet Union. A State Department estimate, compiled on 30 November 1960, argued that Indonesia was more likely to continue using political means to solve the question rather than pursuing armed aggression. While James D. Bell, Director of South-West Pacific Affairs in the United States State Department, sympathised with the External Affairs assessment, he cautioned the Australians that the United States would not take any action that might result in pushing Sukarno closer to the communist camp.

On 27 January 1961, Beale met with Dean Rusk, Kennedy's Secretary of State. Beale outlined the general Australian policy, citing its deep commitment to the area and the Dutch but also pointing out that Australia would honour any agreement that promised self-determination for the people of West New Guinea. Beale's purpose was to provide a clear definition of Australian goals while at the same time lessening the effects of any apprehension Rusk might have received from career State Department officials. Though the Kennedy administration had not developed a clear policy on Indonesia, Rusk emphasised two points to the ambassador. First, the United States would do nothing to damage its influence on Sukarno—a continuation from the Eisenhower administration. The second point was a change in Western strategy. Eisenhower's policy had been to stall and hope the situation would work itself out. Rusk argued that this had not succeeded and suggested consideration of a new policy. Rusk indicated that a trusteeship resting on self-determination offered the strongest political result, but he provided no further information.

The possibility of a trusteeship was not a surprise to Beale. The United States had secretly surveyed Australian views regarding this idea at the end of November 1960. After this initial contact, Menzies instructed Beale to reply to the State Department with objective interest but also pointed out potential problems. Menzies worried that organisational bureaucracy would hamper a United Nations trusteeship. This interference, he concluded, would prejudice the efficiency and integrity of the trustee administration. Menzies also pointed to financing problems and the fact that administrators for the trusteeship would have to come from 'colonial' powers which Sukarno would reject. It was clear to the Australian cabinet that the United States wanted to solve this crisis and believed that a trusteeship was the best possible political solution. Menzies announced that he would visit the United States between 22 and 24 February with the question of West New Guinea among the items on his agenda. When the Cabinet met on 21 February 1961, it agreed to a political delay tactic during which time the Australians would push for the United States to exert the policy of self-determination toward the Indonesians and the Soviet Union. The Cabinet believed the trusteeship policy involved difficulties that might encourage the Indonesians to act irrationally if the policy became public. They considered that a trusteeship would only transfer the problem from the Dutch, in whom the Australians held confidence, to the United Nations that might not resolve the issue in Australia's best interest.

The State Department briefing for President Kennedy outlined Australian concerns about the trusteeship and the strategic geographical position of West New Guinea exactly as the Cabinet had discussed on 21 February 1961. It recommended that Kennedy respond to Menzies by sympathising with the Australians, but argue that the serious nature of the West New Guinea situation
and urgency of the Indonesians demanded a solution. There was no illusion that a trusteeship would solve all of the problems, but they believed it would do much to alleviate tension and encourage the moderate elements in Indonesia. In July 1961, State Department officials and members of the Dutch Foreign Ministry held a series of discussions on West New Guinea. While the Americans did not attempt to obtain a specific agreement, they made it clear that United Nations participation was essential for a satisfactory settlement. At the same time, indications from Australia suggested that public opinion favoured peaceful Indonesian occupation of West New Guinea as a lesser evil. The question asked in Australia was no longer ‘who was right?’, but rather ‘where do our interests lie?’ Australian resignation to the fact that Indonesia would control West New Guinea stemmed from the Kennedy administration’s need for a quick, peaceful settlement. Where Eisenhower and Dulles had been adamant about preserving all territory from potential communist control, Kennedy and Rusk were willing to settle on the small to preserve the large.

Sensing the shift in the Netherlands’ allies, Luns made a proposal to the United Nations on 26 September 1961, in which he announced that the Netherlands would relinquish sovereignty of West New Guinea if the United Nations assumed active supervision for administration and development of the territory. The Netherlands would accept any General Assembly decision that guaranteed self-determination for the population and continued financial contributions for West New Guinea’s development. This represented a vast move forward in Dutch thinking on West New Guinea. Menzies believed the Dutch proposal was very constructive and applauded the interest in self-determination though he doubted that the Indonesians would agree. On 5 October 1961 Beale called on Rusk to discuss the Luns proposal, maintaining that the United States could not remain neutral on such an important issue, especially when the Dutch had taken the initiative. He asked for full American support. Beale believed that West New Guinea would fall to Indonesia unless the United States fully embraced the Dutch proposal. Expectations of American involvement from the Netherlands and Australia grew as Kennedy and Rusk developed their Indonesian policy. On 28 October 1961, Beale and Australian Ambassador to the United Nations, James Plimsoll, met with Rusk to discuss the Dutch proposal. In perhaps the most direct conversation Beale had with the Americans, he asked Rusk whether the United States supported self-determination or the Indonesian policy. The question itself was one based on the Australian version of good versus evil. The Australian position was obvious and Beale needed to know exactly how far the United States would go to satisfy Indonesian aspirations. Rusk responded that the United States would support any solution in which all parties agreed, including Australia, even if it was not based on self-determination. While this was not what the Australians wanted to hear, they had long suspected it. Beale explained to Rusk that the Australians held an opposite view. He spoke bluntly because he wanted the Secretary to know that Australia would have to publicly disagree with the United States, a position they abhorred, if this type of settlement ever occurred. Beale then asked if the United States would support the Dutch proposal to the United Nations. Rusk did not respond directly to the question though he stated that the United States welcomed new initiatives. Rusk did indicate that the Dutch proposal
needed some modification before it could find a consensus in the United Nations. The Australians obtained much information from this encounter. Just as the question for the Australian people had changed from ‘who was right?’ to ‘where do our interests lie?’, so had the initiative for Australian policy makers changed from ‘can we get the United States involved?’ to ‘how can we guide the ever increasing American commitment?’ On 27 November 1961 Jones met with Sukarno, during which the latter, relaxed and rational, stated that Indonesia demanded only removal of the Dutch from West New Guinea and the ‘certainty of free access’ to the territory. By this time, Sukarno knew West New Guinea was Indonesia’s—it was a matter of time and Sukarno could wait while the Dutch showed signs of a weakening position.

The result of this information, passed to the Australians, produced some sense of urgency in Beale. He met with McGeorge Bundy, Special Assistant to the President, on 29 November 1961 during which time Bundy questioned the ambassador on West New Guinea. Beale believed Bundy was an ally, and though not sympathetic to the Dutch, an ally he could use to gain Kennedy’s ear. Beale requested instructions from Menzies on how he could ‘encourage’ American thinking, but this request came at a difficult time. The December 1961 Australian elections were the closest ever held in Australia. Menzies was returned to government with only a two-vote margin in the House of Representatives. The margin was reduced to one after providing for a Speaker to the House. The close elections distracted Menzies and Cabinet officials. In Menzies’ reply to Beale there were no instructions for the ambassador. A second request from Beale in which he stated that W. Averell Harriman, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, was also a potential ally resulted in the Secretary to the Minister for External Affairs, Arthur Tange, responding that the government was not in a position to act. Tange did instruct Beale to inform the Americans that Australia could not accept an arrangement that simply transferred the territory to the Indonesians. Australian officials devoted their time and energy to the immediate crisis in Australia at the expense of Beale, who still believed he could influence American thinking toward a more equitable settlement for the Dutch.

The Australians had accepted the inevitable because the major Western countries involved favoured negotiations but they had serious misgivings about the results of the negotiations. Not only was there continued friction between Australia and Indonesia, but also Sukarno’s interest in additional territory. The Australians were very concerned about Indonesian aggression. On 3 January 1962, Garfield Barwick, the new Minister for External Affairs, asked United States charge d’affaires in Canberra, William Belton, whether the United States would respond to Indonesian military aggression. Belton referred this question to Washington, which caused Beale to ask Harriman the same question on 6 January 1962. Beale asked ‘in frankness’ if the United States would help the Dutch. Harriman responded that the United States would not. Without instruction, Beale then asked whether the United States would support the Australians if they came to the aid of the Netherlands. Harriman gave the same answer, arguing that the United States was under no obligation to come to the aid of the Netherlands and suggested that it would be against Australia’s best interests to intervene. West New Guinea was a part of a larger problem according
to Harriman—how to keep Asia neutral and prevent communism. If the United States came out clearly on the Dutch side, it would destroy any last chance the Americans had to influence Sukarno and Indonesia. Harriman had contempt for Sukarno, but a settlement in West New Guinea was the best way to stop the spread of communism. The United States would continue to supply military assistance to the Indonesians, but it would not aid its NATO ally. 37

On 12 January 1962, Menzies issued a statement on West New Guinea, attempting to pave the way for public support toward a settlement not consonant with previous Australian objectives. 38 The communique discussed the critical nature of the situation and alluded to a solution that involved the United Nations. It was, at best, an apologia for the future of West New Guinea and, at worst, a statement of appeasement. Menzies had little choice in the matter, but he took a great political risk in exposing government policy to the opposition at a time when the government was in a precarious position. The government gradually shifted from a policy that placed preservation of the Netherlands’ control of West New Guinea over conflict with the Indonesians to one where it appeared that it would stand by and give the Indonesians everything they wanted. 39 If Kennedy was determined to find a solution, the best Menzies could hope for was to bring the Australians in line with the United States as soon as possible.

Menzies received support from the Australian Ambassador to Indonesia, Patrick Shaw, who argued that only the Indonesian communists gained from extended negotiation. He reported that, while some ‘responsible’ Indonesian officials still believed in a peaceful solution, many leading officials were looking toward a military solution. The United States and its Western Allies were frustrated in their attempt to influence Indonesia away from the Soviet Union because they refused to support Sukarno on this key issue. Shaw argued that it was time to fully support the United States position, even if it meant an Indonesian administration in West New Guinea. He believed the only other solution was conflict and a loss of Indonesia to communism. 40

United States policy to this point had been strict neutrality and the Kennedy administration had not initially planned to alter this policy. By avoiding the role of mediator, the United States could continue to exert leverage against both the Dutch and Indonesians. It had become apparent, however, that the United States must intercede to draw the Dutch and Indonesians closer together. Through American mediation, the Dutch agreed to discuss their differences with Indonesia, including the transfer of West New Guinea, provided the Indonesians dropped their pre-conditions, namely, that the Dutch agreed to transfer West New Guinea to Indonesia before negotiations commenced. 41 Attorney General Robert Kennedy, brother to the President, undertook the role of United States negotiator. Robert Kennedy went to Indonesia in February 1962 to emphasise the United States’ objectivity in the dispute, citing its refusal to allow Netherlands transit through its territory. This and the refusal to continue the sale of military equipment were signs that the United States was not taking the Dutch side. This attitude bothered the Australians because Sukarno would interpret the American position as silent support for Indonesia. 42 On 18 February 1962, Kennedy, Sukarno, Indonesian foreign minister Subandrio and Jones met to discuss how negotiations could proceed. The Indonesians agreed to drop their pre-conditions as long as the two countries agreed on an agenda. The Dutch wanted
a third party present during the formal negotiations to which the Indonesians concurred, but Sukarno would not accept Secretary General U Thant or any United Nations representative. They agreed that the United States would act as the third party, something the Dutch had already suggested. Robert Kennedy gave no guarantees or assurances regarding the talks, but he did fulfill his mission of bringing Indonesia to the negotiating table.

There was little the Australian government could do at this time to alter the situation, except to ensure American support for the Australian half of the island. Both the Netherlands and Indonesians requested Australia’s support before the secret negotiations began but, in a full circle, Australia asserted that it was not a party to the negotiations and therefore should not be involved. The Australians pleaded neutrality as the United States became entangled in the dispute. On 2 April 1962, United States Ambassador to India, Ellsworth Bunker, introduced a comprehensive set of proposals designed to resolve the Indonesian-Netherlands dispute. The Bunker plan became the basis for further discussion and the foundation for the eventual settlement of the West New Guinea dispute. The plan called for the Dutch to relinquish administrative authority to the United Nations thereby allowing non-Dutch and non-Indonesians to administer the territory. Indonesia was required to allow the people of West New Guinea the opportunity to decide their own fate. Both countries would share the costs of the plan and, once they signed an agreement, relations between the two disputing countries would return to normal. The Bunker Plan was very simple, but its simplicity paved the way for resolution. It focused on the two major stumbling blocks in the dispute: timing of Indonesian control and self-determination. Though an elementary blueprint, the Bunker Plan became significant in resolving the controversy.

The first reaction from the Netherlands on the Bunker proposal was that of ‘explosion’. The Netherlands had not seen the proposal before it was announced, nor had they known that the United States would officially endorse a settlement policy. The former was a result of mis-communication between the State Department and officials at The Hague. Dutch Foreign Minister Luns went as far as to suggest that the United States had double-crossed them. The United States immediately set out to ease Dutch fears and misgivings. One manner of doing so was to convince the Australians to support the proposal in conversations with the Dutch. Robert Lindquist, officer in charge of Indonesian Affairs in the United States Office of South-West Pacific Affairs, explained to Beale that the Netherlands would highly value Australian support. Beale learned that Kennedy and Rusk had instructed Lindquist to speak with him and that the President specifically believed an Australian initiative could be decisive. By 11 April 1962, Beale had informed Rusk that the Australians, though not in complete agreement with the Bunker proposal, had nonetheless recommended to the Dutch that they accept it as a basis for discussion.

Between the initial American request and Australian compliance, Beale received a very important assurance from the United States. On 6 April 1962, Harriman told Beale that Sukarno would not stop with West New Guinea and would look to Australian (East) New Guinea to extend his empire. Beale responded that Australia would fight, then smiling, reminded Harriman of ANZUS and added that Australia expected the United States to come to its
assistance. Harriman replied to the ambassador that, in his own opinion, Australia had every right to expect support from the United States. Though this was an informal conversation, Beale was not at ease when asking if the United States would fulfil its ANZUS commitment. In part, he probably did not want to place the Americans in an awkward position, but he also feared that the United States would not help against an attack on Australian New Guinea. On 10 April Rusk told Beale that the United States regarded itself to be completely committed through ANZUS to assist the Australians in East New Guinea if hostilities occurred. He informed the ambassador that he would clarify any lingering fears when he was in Canberra, but there should be no doubt that the United States would honour its obligation. This assurance was the last great obstacle for the Australians in seeing Indonesia assume control over West New Guinea. With Australian concern for their territory assuaged by American guarantees, the Australian Cabinet could observe the transfer of West New Guinea with ease. It had been Australia’s foreign policy goal in West New Guinea and Indonesia to preserve an ally between itself and the North. Once the United States guaranteed Australian security in Papua New Guinea and against an unruly Sukarno, the Australians found it easy to switch alliances. The real goal for Australia in West New Guinea had been to ensure the presence of a powerful ally against future aggression. The United States more than fulfilled this role.

The United States found itself in the middle of the fray because it officially supported the Bunker proposal and accepted the role as a third party mediator. American officials worked diligently to bring the two disputing parties closer, with a mixture of pressure, enticement and pleading. The primary goal of the Americans was to persuade the Indonesians that force, or the threat of force, would not bring the Netherlands closer to negotiations, while, at the same time, coaxing the Dutch to accept the Bunker proposal. The United States relied on the Australians for support and welcomed their transition from extreme opposition to acceptance of Indonesian rule in West New Guinea. The Dutch rewarded the United States for its persistence in June 1962 when they agreed to use the Bunker proposal.

Dutch agreement did not resolve the dispute between the two countries and there would be several more weeks of intense, sometimes futile, negotiations before reaching a settlement. In the interim, the United States used threats and cajoling to keep the Netherlands and Indonesians focused on the immediate situation. On 31 July 1962 Subandrio left for Djakarta with a preliminary agreement between Indonesia and the Netherlands that called for a multi-phased, United Nations-led transfer of sovereignty from the Dutch to the Indonesians. On 15 August 1962 the two countries reached agreement on the transfer of West New Guinea to Indonesia. The likelihood that Indonesia would assume control of West New Guinea rekindled Australia’s fears for its administration of East New Guinea, but the United States was forthcoming in assuring the security of the Australian-held territory. Rusk made it clear to Barwick, when the latter visited Washington from 10–12 September 1962, that the United States viewed West and East New Guinea separately and would not tolerate any Indonesian incursion into the eastern territory. Kennedy would relay the same information to Menzies during the latter’s visit to Washington on 25 September 1962.
On 14 September 1962, the Dutch Parliament ratified the agreement ending the Netherlands’ presence in the East Indies. The lessons of West New Guinea were clear: the United States did not accomplish its goal because it did not react quickly and with force. While Eisenhower and Dulles were dedicated to denying communist gains, they overestimated their influence with Sukarno in Indonesia. By the time the Kennedy Administration entered office, there was little hope that the Dutch could retain West New Guinea. The Kennedy Administration sacrificed West New Guinea to maintain some influence with Sukarno, but it also viewed another brewing crisis with more concern. South Vietnam became critical in the early 1960s and, with more American eyes focused on that theatre, Kennedy and Rusk pushed a West New Guinea settlement thereby freeing diplomatic and military resources. West New Guinea had become a cold war casualty.

The lessons from West New Guinea for Australia were also distinct. As Australian ambassador to Thailand, Malcolm Booker, would comment: 'We must encourage and support the Americans in holding positions in South-East Asia as far forward as possible.'

Australia supported the United States in West New Guinea because it needed American support in the rest of South-East Asia. The United States and Australia shared common goals in South-East Asia: the containment of communism and continued stability of non-communist governments in Asia and the Pacific. In West New Guinea, the two allies had conflicting means of achieving these goals. Yet, because of the nature of the United States–Australian relationship, Australia yielded in West New Guinea in order to retain its post–Second World War foreign policy and to maintain its emerging partnership with the United States.

ENDNOTES


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