

War for Guam

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War for Guam. Documentary film, 57-minutes, color and black and white, 2015. Produced, directed, and written by Frances Negrón-Muntaner. A production of Polymorphous Pictures, produced in association with Independent Television Service (ITVS), Pacific Islanders in Communications (PIC), and CAAM with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). Distributed by Third World Newsreel, 545 Eighth Avenue, Suite 550, New York, NY 10018. Available at <http://warforguam.com/buy.html>

Puerto Rican director and scholar, Frances Negrón-Muntaner, collaborated with a team of international and Chamorro filmmakers, educators, and activists for 12 years creating *War for Guam*¹. It is the first documentary film to recount the indigenous Chamorro perspective during World War II (WWII) and disclose the ongoing ambiguous relationship between Guam (Guåhan) and the United States of America. Through a combination of personal testimonies and family photographs, archival footage and illustrative graphics, and connected through historical and modern music, *War for Guam* exhibits the lasting intergenerational impact of war. Although the documentary coverage ends in 2005, the film provides a valuable framework for understanding the contemporary and continual Chamorro resistance to American militarization.

War for Guam addresses the complex themes of Chamorro pre-war civil rights, wartime trauma and postwar gratitude, narratives of patriotism and liberation, and expanding American militarization. Throughout the discussion of the American Naval Administration from 1890-1941, followed by three years of Japanese occupation, and then American postwar development, the film challenges the dominant historical narrative of the Chamorros as “loyal” civilians who are “patriotic” to America.

War for Guam describes the undemocratic prewar relationship between the US government and the Chamorros. Under the American Naval Administration, Chamorros were encouraged to be “good Americans” and speak English, yet they were not *legal* American citizens, and they did not identify as Americans. In fact, the US government ignored and dismissed numerous petitions created by Chamorros calling for a civil government (Hattori, 1995, p. 5). As the US government denied the Chamorros their civil rights, the Naval Administration claimed a civilian government would not be able to protect the island. This fabricated justification became irrelevant in 1941 when American military personnel vacated Guam as World War II expanded in the Pacific.

The American military deserted Guam before the Japanese invasion. White American dependents were evacuated, while Chamorro wives and children of American servicemen were not (Sahuma, 2015). However, despite the denial of civil rights followed by the desertion of the American military, historians, military leaders, and politicians continue to promote the narrative that the Chamorros were “the only American civilian population” controlled by the Japanese during WWII (Blaz, 1991). The film’s approach of including indigenous perspectives while critiquing the US’s deceitful relationship with Guam exposes the hypocrisy of framing the Chamorros as patriotic to American-style democracy, while simultaneously being denied their civil rights.

War for Guam displays the Chamorro resistance and survival during WWII through archival footage and interviews with the children of war survivors. The grown children re-tell their parents’ and grandparents’ memories of massacres as well as other stories of suffering. The film includes varying forms of Chamorro resistance to the Japanese Imperial Army occupation, such as the singing of “Dear Uncle Sam, Won’t You Please Come Back to

Guam.” A simplistic analysis would conclude that since Chamorros sang in English, then they must be devoted to America. However, the song can also be understood as Chamorros exercising their limited power against the Japanese, motivated to spite the Japanese, rather than for American rule. Chamorros understood that the Japanese were concerned about an American “re-taking” of Guam, and by singing in English, Chamorros were able to resist Japanese rule. However, the resistance was not limited to singing in English; Chamorros also continued to speak in Chamorro.

During the period of Japanese occupation, through historical records and re-enactments, the film follows two individuals, Chamorro priest Father Jesus Baza Duenas, and American Navy Radioman George Tweed. Father Duenas led a “one man resistance” and defied the Japanese by continuing to speak and provide Church services in Chamorro. George Tweed was the only surviving American left on the island and he only survived because of the 30 Chamorro families who sheltered him from the Japanese Imperial Army. Tweed was a symbol of America, and the Chamorros believed that the American military would return for him. Although Chamorros endured torture and even died protecting Tweed during the three year occupation, he never acknowledged the sacrifices of the Chamorro people after American forces rescued him. Tweed’s relationship with the Chamorros serves as a metaphor for the American post-war betrayal of the Chamorros.

Chamorros were grateful that the brutal Japanese Imperial Army occupation came to an end in 1944, but the initial post-war appreciation turned sour. *War for Guam* provides a critique of the common storyline of the American military as “saviors” and “liberators” of Guam. Before landing on Guam, the America military dropped thousands of pounds of bombs for 13 days on the island. When thousands of American marines “retook” the island on July 21, 1944, some were surprised that there was an indigenous civilian population and that they actually spoke English.

After “liberation,” Chamorros who had recently lost their loved ones during the occupation, were then removed from their land, lost access to fishing grounds, and even their ancestors’ graves. Chamorro houses were bulldozed, entire villages condemned, and farmlands were taken for both military and recreational use by the Americans. While the film states that almost three-fourths of the island came under military control, other sources cite two-thirds of the land was taken (Hattori, 1995; Negrón-Muntaner, 2015b). Whatever the amounts, Guam was transformed by the American military presence without any negotiations and insufficient compensation. Many Chamorros understood the need for the American military to construct bases and fortifications, but when land and beach access was taken for recreation, they began to question the meaning of “liberation.”

War for Guam also touches on the many ways July 21st remains controversial. Today, July 21st is publically promoted as “Liberation Day” and is memorialized as the day the US military returned to free the Chamorros from the Japanese. But a more critical review of history shows that the Americans did not consider the indigenous population of Chamorros during the retaking of Guam. Their lives were not part of the re-occupying strategy. Thus many Chamorros question the concept of American “liberation” and rephrase it as the “invasion of Guam” (Sahuma, 2016). However, the film could have discussed further how July 21st can truly be considered “Liberation Day” when the liberators have not left and instead continue to militarize the island despite protest from the residents.

Nearly one-third of the island remains as restricted military bases for every branch of the US military (Natividad & Kirk, 2010). The determination to get back Chamorro ancestral land taken after “liberation” now spans several generations. Through interviews, the film shows how much of the land remains restricted or has become private commercial areas, including a McDonalds. In addition to ancestral lands yet to be returned, WWII survivors are still waiting for WWII reparations from the US government. This lingering legacy is another

example of US betrayal of the Chamorros. While many remain grateful for the Americans returning in 1944, as Jose Garrido states in the film, “For many of us, the war is not over.” Indeed, the group *Guam World War II Reparations Advocates, Inc.* intends to file a lawsuit on behalf of the survivors (Salas Matanane, 2016).

Guam is located 5,800 miles from the continental US, is politically separated from the rest of the Mariana Archipelago, and remains a possession of the US. While Chamorros are American citizens, the combination of perceived loyalty and ongoing betrayal continues to define Chamorro’s relationship with the US and the fight for full self-determination continues today. Again, this contemporary unbalanced relationship between the Chamorros and the US government could have been addressed more deeply and critically throughout the film, especially because the militarization of the island continues through the “Pivot to the Pacific” foreign policy. Plans for Guam include the relocation of US marines plus their dependents and the construction of live-fire ranges adjacent to Ritidian National Wildlife Refuge. Housing for the Marines and the live-fire ranges will be on land taken under eminent domain from the Artero family and others in 1963 by the federal government. Concerned residents continue to protest this build-up and work for gaining WWII reparations. Past betrayals and ongoing unresolved issues, such as WWII reparations and the restriction to Chamorro lands, create an atmosphere of skepticism regarding the promised benefits of the “Pivot.” The film provides an excellent visual account of this contentious relationship. It asks why, as Chamorros continue to serve in the US military at higher rates than any state in the nation, they continue to be disenfranchised on their own island, politically and geographically.

War for Guam is an invaluable teaching tool for mature students of history and political science to learn about the lasting and complicated impacts of war and legacies of trauma. Land struggles and war reparations continue to inspire the demilitarization efforts and resistance to the “Pivot” on Guam. The film provides a framework to discuss concepts of patriotism and liberation, imperialism and democracy, and American citizenship and decolonization possibilities. Additionally, the film serves as a political statement and should be required viewing for the US government in support of the lawsuit to bring the long overdue war reparations for the WWII survivors.

References

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Note:

¹ See Frances Negrón-Muntaner’s End the war in Guam, calling for progress and closure for WWII survivors and their families (Negrón-Muntaner, 2015a).