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# A Matter of Small Consequence

## *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Tragedy of East Timor*

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JERRY K. SWEENEY

When East Timor resurfaced as a journalistic destination, most Americans were hard put to find it on a map. Later, when the Clinton administration took official notice, some were wont to label the U.S. interest yet another example of a meritorious intervention, similar to the one in Kosovo. Others, familiar with East Timor and its problems, suspected the new U.S. involvement was the product of a guilty conscience. I myself recalled an observation from the film *Bull Durham*. Annie Savoy (played by Susan Sarandon) opines to the audience in the opening credits: “A guy will listen to anything if he thinks it’s foreplay.” The United States was never, in any wise, interested in the well-being of the East Timorese. The United States was not inclined to listen to what they had to say, especially if their grievances were justified. East Timor was and will be nothing more to the United States than a means to ephemeral ends involving a third party.

### **The Portuguese Connection**

Our tale begins in 1942, when the successes of German submarine warfare led the Allied High Command to realize that a successful campaign against the U-boats would require an airbase in the Portuguese Azores. This realization placed Washing-

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Jerry K. Sweeney is a professor in and the head of the Department of History at South Dakota State University, Brookings, South Dakota.

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ton in a good news/bad news situation. The bad news was that Portugal was a neutral nation in 1942. The good news was that Lisbon was party to an ancient alliance with the British, a U.S. ally. Britain and Portugal had avowed their friendship in 1373, and they concluded a formal treaty of alliance in 1386.

Thus, in the fullness of time, U.S. aircraft based in the Azores put paid to the efforts of the German navy. Despite the success of the antisubmarine campaign, however, the Department of War was disconsolate. In the first instance, the U.S. presence in the Azores was under the auspices of the Royal Air Force. Not surprisingly, the War Department preferred a wholly owned U.S. subsidiary. In addition, the existing facility at Lajes could not be expanded to handle an increase in air traffic incident to the invasion of Europe or Japan. Finally, there was no doubt that a second airfield would be beneficial during bad weather. In consequence, at the end of 1943, Washington was committed to the establishment of a base independent of British control.

Enter from stage left the Portuguese colony of East Timor, which the Japanese had occupied in the early months of 1942 as part of their drive on Australia. Despite regular protests by Lisbon, the Japanese remained obdurate. The Portuguese government believed that if it did not liberate the colony before the end of the Pacific War, Portugal might lose control of it in a general postwar settlement. This situation created what seemed a match made in heaven. The United States would provide the logistical support necessary to liberate East Timor, and Lisbon would authorize a U.S. base in the Azores. Of course, when sovereign states negotiate, there's many a slip betwixt the cup and the lip.

The Portuguese were not inclined to risk the ignominy that had resulted from their resort to arms during World War I. Portugal had left that conflict as a discarded and useless country. By 1943, however, Portuguese neutrality was proving quite profitable. If Lisbon managed to liberate East Timor, Portugal not only would survive the war unscathed, but would recover a lost colony in the bargain. In the minds of most Portuguese, the empire was vital to the nation's existence as a sovereign state. Without the empire, Portugal was perceived as little more than a hodgepodge of ethnic remnants strung along a coastal plain. In fact, more than one outside observer noted that the Portuguese were almost pathologically suspicious concerning the empire, and national dismay set in when even a rumor of foreign annexation was afoot. In addition, it was widely believed that the loss of the colonies would presage the end of the authoritarian state created by Antonio de Oliveira Salazar in 1933 (Guimaraes 1993–94; Sweeney 1997). However, any firm commitment to the liberation of East Timor most assuredly would affect operations designed to defeat the Japanese. Therefore, the Americans sought to fashion an agreement that would allow a facility in the Azores with a minimal obligation to support the Portuguese liberation of Timor.

Both sides played their cards carefully, notwithstanding the fact that the United States was the five-thousand-pound gorilla at the table. A bargain was struck and the necessary documents exchanged on November 28, 1944. Once construction of an airfield on the island of Santa Maria was under way, U.S. officials, not unreasonably,

believed the Luso-American connection was on solid ground. They were dismayed, therefore, when East Timor emerged as an item in the negotiations over a postwar aviation agreement. Fortunately for the United States, Japan's surrender on August 15, 1945, rendered the matter moot.

Admittedly, a slight contretemps developed over who should accept the surrender of the Japanese forces on the island. The British and the Australian governments insisted that Lisbon could not accept the surrender of Japanese troops because Portugal was a neutral state. London dismissed the resulting Portuguese protests as perfunctory. Washington, for its part, repeatedly requested that London find a way to satisfy Portugal's nationalistic sentiments, clearly seeking to convince Lisbon that it accepted all the obligations implicit in the Santa Maria agreements. The United States reaped an enormous harvest from a series of otherwise innocuous diplomatic notes. The deadlock over the aviation agreement was broken within a month, when the Portuguese reversed their former position on several key points. Unfortunately for the American taxpayer, the newly created base in the Azores was a casualty of the aviation negotiation: Portugal paid \$859,000 for a facility and equipment worth an estimated \$2,200,000.

In the decades following the war, the Luso-American connection focused on the U.S. facility in the Azores. So long as the ability of military aircraft to cross the Atlantic remained limited, the airbase was crucial to the defense of the United States. An alternative route by way of Newfoundland and England was considered less desirable because of erratic weather patterns. Additional proof of the value of the Azores base came forth in October 1973. In view of the enormous equipment losses suffered by the Israeli Defense Force during the Yom Kippur War, Washington initiated an emergency resupply operation. Unfortunately, that effort could succeed only if the planes refueled in the Azores. Not surprisingly, the Portuguese government demurred, but the U.S. secretary of state read them the riot act. The U.S. planes landed in the Azores, and Portugal became subject to the retaliatory oil embargo imposed by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) on October 21, 1973. The Azores were valuable, but Lisbon learned that Washington's forbearance had limits.

Portugal profited considerably from the Luso-American connection, so much so that, unlike its neighbor to the east, it became a founding member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). When the issue of the dictatorial nature of the Portuguese government was raised in an executive session of the U.S. Senate, a State Department representative responded that "if it is a dictatorship, it is because the people freely voted for it" (Kaplan 1984, 109–10). As for East Timor, the State Department deemed the colony of so little consequence that it did not even achieve the status of unnoticed. Sumner Welles spoke for countless future U.S. diplomats when he avowed that the territory should be independent but that the process would take a thousand years (Louis 1978, 237). Of course, over time some Americans questioned the need to concern themselves with Portugal or its colonial empire when the whole of Western civilization was presumably at stake. A nation thoroughly convinced

of the overweening importance of its own interests found it difficult to recognize another's needs or to attempt to understand the complexities of another's internal politics.

## The Crumbling Portuguese Empire

Questions about the future of European colonialism and a seemingly aggressive Soviet Union posed an insuperable dilemma for the United States. Precedent and ideological consistency mandated a national response that condemned colonialism in all its manifold versions. Nonetheless, most Cold Warriors averred that they must not allow the past to endanger interallied relations or overseas bases. Thus, Washington was wont to assume a rhetorical anticolonial posture while underwriting the colonial aspirations of its allies. This effort to split the difference between the dreams of indigenous peoples and the interests of colonial powers was frustrating, albeit apparently necessary. Of course, the United States was not alone in this approach. Despite the obvious propaganda value, the principle of self-determination was seldom acknowledged or widely applied by the USSR before the mid-1950s. The United States on occasion did tilt to one side or the other, as it did when it offered early support to racist regimes in Rhodesia and South Africa. Washington was further induced to assist in maintaining the Portuguese empire. Despite an official embargo imposed by Congress, the United States transferred substantial quantities of dual-use equipment to Portugal for its colonial campaigns. Neither side anticipated, however, a situation that would force Washington to choose between conflicting imperial commitments.

The wars Portugal fought in Angola and Mozambique were as bitter and as unsuccessful as most such campaigns in the postwar decades. Moreover, the wars severely damaged the Portuguese economy. Indeed, the African wars were a significant factor in the coup d'état that installed a new government in Lisbon on April 25, 1974. Therefore, the new regime was driven toward colonial disengagement. Because pervasive and vocal independence movements existed in the several African colonies, those territories had to be placed on the road to independence.

What then about the rest of the empire? Although Portugal and China agreed with regard to the future of Macao, East Timor was another matter altogether. The colony was relatively tranquil, and a continued Portuguese presence there would not require a significant financial outlay. The Japanese occupation had not sparked nationalist movements such as those that had emerged in Indonesia, Burma (Myanmar), and Malaya. Furthermore, Portuguese Timor was also distinct in colonial Southeast Asia in that it had no underground communist movement—a situation owing, in equal parts, to the efficiency of the Portuguese secret police and to the lack of an educated native elite. Mayhap, Lisbon might retain one last remnant of its imperial past. However, much to Lisbon's dismay, East Timor also fell prey to the independence virus.

## East Timorese Independence and Indonesian Absorption

In May 1974, three political movements emerged in East Timor, representing the plausible options open to the colony: continuation of colonial status, union with neighboring Indonesia, and immediate independence. The groups were, respectively, the Uniao Democratica de Timor (UDT), the Associacao Popular Democratica de Timor (APODETI), and the Frente Revolucionaria de Timor Leste Independente (FRETILIN). Independence was easily the most popular alternative. The continuation of the status quo and union with Indonesia placed a distant second and third. Lisbon had severe reservations about the viability of an independent East Timor but authorized the colonial governor to open negotiations. The result was a new constitution and a timetable for an independent East Timor. At this juncture, the UDT attempted a coup de main on August 11, 1975. The conflict that ensued gave rise to the departure of the Portuguese government and the apparent victory of those who supported immediate independence. Thus, on November 28, 1975, the world was informed of the existence of a new state: the Democratic Republic of East Timor.

What happened next was to some degree inevitable. Postcolonial governments have been wont to implement programs for socioeconomic reconstruction. Unfortunately, when the immediate neighbor is in a postrevolutionary, if not reactionary, phase, this process invites retribution. Prior to the emergence of the East Timorese republic, the Indonesian struggle for independence had brought Ahmed Sukarno to power as that nation's first constitutional president. Unfortunately for him, Sukarno was perceived as too dependent on the Indonesian Communist Party. This situation provoked discontent within the Indonesian army. In consequence, a military junta mounted a coup d'etat in 1965. The United States and Australia enthusiastically greeted this triumph of unrepresentative democracy, viewing Indonesia as having been safely removed from the path of falling dominoes.

Which is a roundabout way of saying that the Indonesian government of President Raden Suharto was wary of an independent East Timor. Although the new nation was officially nonaligned, might not the Timorese, in pursuit of aid to alleviate the effects of Portuguese colonialism, seek assistance for whatever quarter? In 1974, the idea that East Timor might become the Cuba of the South Pacific was not considered a delusion born of extremist politics. Yet another factor influencing Indonesia was the possibility of propinquitous unification. A colonial fiat had divided the island of Timor between Portugal and The Netherlands in 1895. When Indonesia gained its independence, West Timor was included. Surely the indigenous residents of East Timor might one day seek to create a united Timor.

Whatever the reason, in the early hours of December 8, 1975, the Indonesian armed forces moved against the people of East Timor. International protests and United Nations resolutions proved ineffective. Indonesia continued to absorb the

briefly independent nation. It must be noted at this point that convincing evidence exists to support the assertion that a faction within the Indonesian military had planned the annexation of East Timor as early as 1969 (Taylor 1999). In any event, on July 17, 1976, President Suharto announced the incorporation of East Timor as Indonesia's twenty-seventh province, whereupon the United States sought to possess the pastry while consuming the same.

The Indonesian action placed the United States on the horns of a strategic dilemma. The Azores remained an essential aspect of the U.S. defense posture. Despite the advent of in-flight refueling, the facility retained its importance because tanker aircraft themselves must frequently land. Furthermore, a combination of heavy cargo and a strong headwind severely degrades the ability of even a C-141 to cross the Atlantic without refueling. Once that aircraft has been replaced with the C-17, the Lajes facility may become less important. (Of course, aircraft crews faced with mid-flight emergencies will undoubtedly continue to appreciate its existence.)

Indonesia offered commensurate rewards to the United States—to wit, the Ombai-Wetar Straits that lie north of Timor. The extremely deep channels of the straits provide undetected access for submarines between the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. Any nation deploying missile-bearing submarines will appreciate the strategic significance of the waterway. Submarines passing through the Straits of Malacca must surface, and they are therefore susceptible to detection by satellite surveillance. The use of Lombok or Selat Sunda straits adds at least eight days to a submarine's travel time from one ocean to the other.

Washington concluded that placing control of a choke point in the hands of a proven anticommunist government was preferable to the alternative. The leaders of an independent East Timor, whoever prevailed, might favor the United States. Nevertheless, the probability that East Timor might be so inclined had to be balanced against the certainty that Raden Suharto was a client of long standing.

President Gerald Ford and Henry Kissinger met with Suharto the day before the invasion of East Timor began. Indonesian communications intercepted by U.S. intelligence organizations reveal that President Suharto was concerned that the takeover might jeopardize U.S. aid. Central Intelligence Agency and Defense Intelligence Agency reports further indicate that Suharto wished to look Ford and Kissinger *in the eye* and to obtain their approval of the operation (Chomsky 1980; Nairn 1992–93; Pilger 1994) Both parties obviously were satisfied in that U.S. aid to Indonesia continued apace.

As for the East Timorese, they joined that ever-lengthening list of agenda items placed in diplomatic limbo by the members of the United Nations (UN). The UN's only positive action was to recognize Portugal as the legal administrator of East Timor. Portugal broke diplomatic relations with Indonesia and requested UN sanctions with the view of returning Timor to its preinvasion status. The matter appeared annually on the UN agenda, and both Portugal and Indonesia carefully monitored each vote. The United States abstained from voting. When The Netherlands raised

the issue of human rights violations in East Timor in 1992, Indonesia, with the approval of the World Bank, rejected Dutch aid. Portugal was able to scupper an agreement between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the European Community in 1993, but most European countries viewed the issue as a bilateral problem and conducted business as usual.

East Timor is heavily dependent on subsistence agriculture and a tenuous transportation infrastructure. The island is also host to a plethora of tropical ailments. In consequence, the Indonesian invasion and the resistance thereto proved catastrophic, with more than 10 percent of the population dying of causes directly attributable to the invasion. Many of the deaths were at the hands of the Indonesian army, but the largest group died of famine and disease. Exact figures are impossible to give because access to East Timor was severely restricted after the invasion and subsequent reports were sometimes affected by political bias. Moreover, although allegations of extraordinary atrocities surfaced on both sides, independently verifiable evidence was difficult to obtain. Nevertheless, none of this mattered much in the larger scheme of things. Indonesia was given a free rein within its national borders. Most nations live in glass houses, so it is hardly surprising that they tend to support a ban on rocks.

### **The Cable News Network Factor and U.S. Foreign Policy**

There matters might have remained, save for the coming of Cable News Network (CNN) diplomacy and the time of falling dictators. Nations that once accepted the tyrant's lash became at least nominally independent, as the likes of Ferdinand Marcos, Anastasio Somoza, Augusto Pinochet, Jean-Claude Duvalier, and even the odious Idi Amin relinquished the reins of power. The retribution school avowed that such discredited despots should be hounded through the streets until a suitable lamp post was located. This group was wont to insist that if vengeance be left to providence, it must be expeditious and broadcast on cable! Conversely, the pragmatic, less-sanguinary school asserted that seeing a monster off was more important than a visceral vindication. This faction was of a mind that thieves are more inclined to surrender when giving up does not result in being drawn and quartered. In any event, the realization that it was safe to dismount the tiger hardly went unnoticed within the ranks of remaining autocrats. Nor did those in power fail to note what occurred when their fellow despots faced opposition from groups whose images raced around the globe.

In the closing decades of the twentieth century, television—especially as broadcast by organizations such as CNN—bid fair to become a dominant factor on the foreign-policy scene. At first, television was conceived as little more than a newspaper with pictures. The coverage of the U.S. effort in South Vietnam disabused not a few journalists of that notion. Newspaper photographs were static, whereas television imagery was dynamic. For decades, print editors had affirmed: if it bleeds, it leads. That hoary



mantra now became the question: have we got film? Are pictures available that tell a story through sound and movement?

Generations of American children were told to clean their plates because others were starving elsewhere. As the century drew to an end, Americans in the sanctity of their living rooms could see the starving children. When war broke out in South Korea in 1950, Americans scrambled to find an atlas. In 1992, their grandchildren watched real-time images from Somalia and Kazakstan. The world became an omnipresent feature in American life. It demanded attention and a response. And therein lay the rub. Absent evocative images, the inclination of television networks to cover a story is severely compromised. Now the medium had become the message. When containment gave way to a renewed world order, these two contrasting developments came together in a deleterious, yet propitious manner for East Timor.

For more than a century, Americans followed George Washington's advice: they avoided foreign entanglements in pursuit of the creation of a powerful nation. They patiently awaited the day when the world would see the wisdom of the American way. With the end of World War II, however, the nation abandoned its position as a beacon in the darkness and set forth looking, as John Quincy Adams once phrased it, for monsters to destroy. Adams also opined, on the same occasion, that if the nation engaged in an active foreign policy, it might control the world, but it would no longer rule its own spirit.

Then came the Soviet threat and the vicissitudes of a bipolar world. Everything Americans held dear was in some wise threatened. So threats were given priority, budgets unbalanced, resources exploited, and allies acquired. Still, the American crusade against the Evil Empire was resolved in an unexpected manner. The Soviet Union was not vanquished. Instead, it melted away like a sand castle at high tide, leaving behind an inchoate democracy of uncertain purpose or life span. Americans found they had made history, but not in the manner they had intended.

A return to the undiluted past was out of the question. Isolation was incompatible with the demands of a global marketplace. Meanwhile, Vietnam, El Salvador, and a host of other warm places put paid to the idea of remaking the world in the American image. Perhaps a tincture of both policies would suffice. Selective engagement might allow the United States to elaborate tailored solutions, thereby avoiding the knee-jerk reactions that allowed the Vietnam incursion. Admittedly, this approach did not achieve total acceptance. Nonetheless, the newly elected Clinton administration was seemingly committed to a new approach. A White House panel avowed that the first question in any foreign-policy debate was: what's in it for us? (*New York Times*, September 9, 1999).

Of course, it might be argued that this view was "deja vu all over again." Throughout the Cold War, the United States meddled incessantly around the globe in support of its self-interest. Certain lines, however, were never seriously compromised. The existence of the Soviet Union served to constrain U.S. actions. Such was no longer the case. The United States was now free to thrash about unhindered, yet

if it was free from outside limitations, it was not devoid of fissures in the fabric of American society. The Gulf War engendered reservations about the nature of the American dream. One response was to abjure the lure of Satan. Any contact between the unregenerate and the regenerate must be avoided. The United States was without flaw and must remain sacrosanct. What some saw as a sickness, however, others viewed as a life-affirming experience. The resulting culture wars threatened to tear the nation apart.

The rest of the world was amused and bemused. Americans used to possess all the answers. Now they were thoroughly at odds with themselves, and any consensus was by the boards. Thus did a normally fractious people descend into unprecedented depths of disputatious acrimony. Americans at one time could be relied on to behave in a predictable fashion. They might be a day late and a dollar short, but they would arrive. Then they would save the world to one extent or another. Now it was questionable if the Americans would join the party at all. Or, if they did arrive, might they not leave early once the televised images proved unfavorable?

Televised images goaded the United States toward involvement in Bosnia and Kosovo. Televised footage of the famine in Somalia was undoubtedly a factor in the decision to send U.S. forces to East Africa, and those selfsame images, this time of Americans killed and injured, provoked the U.S. withdrawal. Television could incite both action and reaction. Only one question remained. What would happen when something evil occurred and no provocative images flickered into American households? The world got a glimmer of an answer when the government of Rwanda began to exterminate its minority Tutsi population. Although U.S. officials did not conspire with murderers in Rwanda, a compelling case might be made that they most certainly did little to obstruct them (Power 2001).

### East Timor—Still Beneath U.S. Notice

Then came the May 3, 1994, presidential decision directive establishing the parameters of U.S. involvement in a United Nations peacekeeping operation. Henceforth the United States would pursue cafeteria intervention. Americans would support operations to help the embattled inhabitants of some nations but not others. Moreover, the United States would not resolve claims to sovereignty with regard to their intrinsic merits; instead, it would handle such problems with reference to geopolitical calculations. Presidential Decision Directive 25, titled *Reforming Multilateral Peace Operations* (U.S. Department of State 1996), in words reminiscent of Casper Weinberger, stipulated clear criteria. First, a clear threat to U.S. security must exist. Second, there must be substantial public support for intervention. Third, other countries must participate under UN supervision. Fourth, the United States must be assured that long-term nation building would not be necessary.

In the end, it all came together. A regional economic crisis placed Indonesia's crony capitalism in default, and the economic situation produced riots that found

their way onto countless television screens. Faced with seemingly incontrovertible proof that Raden Suharto had lost his grip, his foreign supporters turned away. The Indonesian tree of state obviously required a measure of pruning. Therefore, the house of cards so painstakingly created by Suharto tumbled with his resignation on May 21, 1998. Suharto left for internal exile, and Vice President B. J. Habibie stepped to the fore. Then, for reasons presumably manifold, if still inexplicable, President Habibie announced that he would allow the people of East Timor to hold a referendum, the results of which, he asserted, would determine the destiny of the fractious province. Perhaps Habibie believed the referendum would yield a safe majority for Indonesia, or he might have been bowing to pressure from Indonesia's international financial donors. It is even conceivable that he believed it was time to cut the country's losses.

In 1862, Abraham Lincoln used the words *free* and *Negro* in the same sentence in the Emancipation Proclamation. Whatever else happened after that, there was no possibility that chattel slavery would survive the war. Such was also the case when Habibie coupled the words *referendum* and *East Timor*. Few, if any, among the Indonesian governing elite imagined the East Timorese would elect to associate with their oppressor. Unfortunately, all that was on offer was a plebiscite. Nothing was said about whether the process would be without incident. As the world knows, East Timor was racked with violence before the referendum. Moreover, when the East Timorese opted for independence, their country was subjected to devastation on a thoroughly disgusting scale.

Where then stood the city on the hill? Absent compelling electronic images or strategic considerations, the United States found small initial profit in affairs Timorese. The international press did provide voluminous coverage of the aftermath of the independence referendum, but televised images were sparse in the United States. Americans could read about the travail of the Timorese people, but images of the carnage were unavailable. Maybe the networks decided that graveyards do not make exhilarating images. Then, after international peacekeepers had entered East Timor, the world's media found other avenues to explore.

Portugal and its Atlantic islands had mattered. Indonesia had mattered. East Timor was a speed bump on the road leading to stability elsewhere (Mufson 1999). Reporters for the *New York Times* averred that the United States was disposed to put its relationship with Indonesia ahead of its concern over the fate of East Timor (Becker and Shenon 1993). James Foley, a State Department spokesman, in late August 1999 and Secretary of Defense William Cohen in a press briefing on September 8, 1999, seemingly validated such views (Alcorn 1999). Only when the Australian government expressed official concern about conditions in East Timor did Washington find time to consider the problem.

Some insist the Australian government was engaged in damage control after decades of backing the Suharto regime (Hainsworth and McCloskey 2000). There was also the matter of the extensive oil deposits located south of the island of Timor.

East Timor signed a lucrative development agreement with Australia on July 3, 2001 (“Australia sees reason,” *The Economist*, July 7, 2001, 41). In any event, once Canberra expressed an interest in East Timor, diplomatic antennas in Washington began to quiver. Governments will listen, but only if they think an advantageous obligation may eventuate. Indeed, the most important motivation behind the affairs of nations is not the threat of force but services rendered and debts redeemable. If Indonesia imploded, the United States must be on good terms with the only power that might support its regional endeavors in the future (Hartcher 1999).

Was the United States moved by a guilty conscience or inspired to meritorious intervention in the affairs of East Timor? I am disposed to support a third alternative: it was simply taking care of business. Americans have a penchant for following the course of least resistance. It is, I submit, a significant ingredient in their national success. Unfortunately, that same propensity is a source of shame when Americans sacrifice peoples and nations on the altar of the greater good. The United States was not after merit, nor was it consumed by guilt regarding East Timor. Washington saw no reason to exhibit even a modicum of testicular fortitude. The past was precedent, prologue, and too much of a burden to shift. East Timor and its people had never been deemed worthy of interest, and so they must remain. What truly mattered was whether the United States might gain some momentary advantage elsewhere. The diplomatic foreplay emanating from Canberra will surely yield desirable results. Australia will someday be reminded that no good deed goes unpunished.

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