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Government by the Gun: The Unfinished Business of Fiji's  
2000 Coup (review)

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(Review)

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cherish and refer to repeatedly in the course of their undergraduate and postgraduate studies. It is an excellent point of reference for thinking about and reflecting on the region's pasts. Teachers will welcome its attempt to debunk the widely held view that history is about nothing more than dates and dead white men. History is projected as more than a product to memorize, more than a set of facts collected and organized by others that one dutifully learns in order to be conversant with times past or to affirm a connection to those now dead. Rather, history-telling in this book becomes an active, participatory process (28). It invigorates the present. It affirms who we are by describing what we have been and it inspires what we may yet become. This book's readability will encourage readers from a variety of backgrounds and interests (including anthropology, cultural studies, literature, political studies, and, of course, history) to weave their own narratives and develop further conversations across our many shared experiences and differences. Readers will also appreciate the delicate tandem between the "how" (theory and historiography) and the "what" (content) of Pacific history that Borofsky has successfully orchestrated. This makes it more useful than such large, content-based texts as the *Cambridge History of the Pacific Islands* (Cambridge University Press, 1997). The comprehensive bibliography is another excellent feature of the book that is sure to benefit serious researchers across several disciplines. The onus is now on us, the multivocal Pacific, to make a reality out of the book's honorable intentions. For as Hemenstall so aptly puts it, "Historicizing colonial

encounters for the present demands not the discovery of hidden caches of documents, but the releasing of voices that were previously muted or ignored . . . so that the storytelling that is history attains a fresh honesty and richness" (60). Whether we are novices or established academics, we must continue to reframe and reconceptualize what has been said in the past. In this process, it may well be that some of the established personalities and events of Pacific history will fade to the wings where they will be less visible and more tentative. But we are confident that this exercise will create the necessary space for whole previously invisible groups to claim an identity and their share of center stage.

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*Government by the Gun: The Unfinished Business of Fiji's 2000 Coup*, by Robbie Robertson and William Sutherland. Australia: Pluto Press; London: Zed Books, 2001. ISBN 1-84277-115-9; xix + 169 pages, glossary, chronology, endnotes, index. A\$34.95.

In May 2000, failed businessman George Speight and his accomplices seized hostages in Suva's parliamentary complex. Labour Prime Minister Chaudhry, his cabinet, and parliamentary colleagues then remained incarcerated for almost eight weeks. The army's failure to secure and isolate parliament, deny Speight generous access to the news media, or prevent

his followers from roaming Suva or beyond on arson, looting, cattle stealing, and food theft expeditions, pointed to military acquiescence in the hostage taking. These events provoked easily the worst constitutional, political, and social crisis to beset Fiji since its independence in 1970. For months the country was rudderless, its economy in free fall, and its bickering chiefly establishment subject to increasing ridicule by commoner Fijians.

These ruptures—including serious divisions within the military—could take years to repair. By 2002, some economic recuperation had occurred, but politically, Laisenia Qarase's government remained trapped in a miasma of indecision and suspect legitimacy. Determined to keep Chaudhry and his Labour party colleagues at arm's length, Qarase refused to comply with court rulings indicating that, under the terms of the 1997 constitution, the Labour party had polled sufficiently well in the August 2001 elections to allow it to participate within a governing coalition.

Robertson and Sutherland are seasoned Fiji observers with excellent local sources, which they have used to advantage in a first chapter describing what happened preceding, during, and immediately following the hostage crisis of 2000. Their writing conveys a sense of urgency and tension where crisis is never remote. Several themes emerge from their account. A first was the military's vacillation, which thinly disguised divisions spanning, at one extreme, special forces instructor and hostage-taking instigator Ilisioni Ligairi; then those who tut-tutted their disapproval of Speight's treasonable

tactics, but sympathized with his supremacist objectives; and finally a minority of military professionals not wanting a part of these unsavory dealings. Key figures such as Colonel Filipo Tarakinikini veered toward the supremacist end of the spectrum, while Commodore Frank Bainimarama tried to hold the line as a moderate. An ostensibly civilianized Sitiveni Rabuka, who had led the 1987 military coups but later became prime minister, is shown in these pages as now not much more than a discredited opportunist.

A second feature to emerge from this account is Mahendra Chaudhry's defective political antennae. Within a year of winning office in 1999, he had alienated supporters and buoyed adversaries with an aloofness that ignored warnings about proceeding too quickly over land reform, mishandling the news media, and repeatedly failing to confide his government's objectives to the public. These shortcomings were meat and drink to local ethnic chauvinists, although this study makes it clear that their major grievance lay with long-standing failures of indigenous economic distribution and institutional management.

A third theme is the established Fijian leadership's credibility deficit; it failed to face down Speight, his methods, or what he stood for. President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara was losing touch, the Great Council of Chiefs appeared fractious and indecisive, while the regional confederacies remained deeply at odds. Adding to this vacuum at the center was an inflammation of rivalries between the Cakobau and Mara chiefly families. This left the rebels and the Fiji military playing a cat-and-mouse game,

effectively resolved only after a media-saturated, too-confident Speight overplayed his hand by demanding a government totally unacceptable to Commodore Bainimarama. The military then seized on this tactical extravagance to crack down, arresting Speight and his ringleaders, and edging the country away from the complete breakdown of order that was all too imminent in mid-2000.

In essence, what occurred in 2000 constituted an eruption of long-standing disaffection within the Fijian community. Standing back from these events to locate deeper causes of alienation, the authors retrace already familiar ground. As a public mechanism, the state in Fiji has not been emancipated from indigenous pressures molding it for the furtherance of sectional objectives. The colonial edifice has persisted through institutions that, while ostensibly designed to protect the indigenous community, have pauperized the majority to the advantage of self-serving elites. Poor standards of educational attainment among Fijians remain a running sore. Pressures for democratization and ostensible multiracialism have chafed against Fijian commoner discontent with the economic outcomes of chiefly led paramouncy. Although constrained for periods, the ethnic populism that Speight exploited never lay far below the surface.

Looking ahead (“Key Issues for the Future”), the authors acknowledge the need for a more honest appraisal of indigeneity; the need to disentangle that agenda from supremacist sloganeering; the need for national identity creation, devolved decision making, transparency, accountability, and

adherence to the rule of law by Fijian institutions; as well as the need for greater specificity in the targeting of assistance to disadvantaged Fijians. They also recommend that all Fijian citizens should be known as Fijian, and where differentiation is required, the terms *i taukei* (indigenous) or *vasu* (nonindigenous) be utilized. Anti-racialism should form a specific educational project; civil society must be strengthened; and economic strategies entailing a massive redistribution of resources are required. But how politically feasible are these laudable objectives? A reading of this lively account suggests that they face an uphill battle, given that strong interests of both a national and an international nature may impede equity delivery, land reform, and a political system unused to governing by popular consent.

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*Perilous Memories: The Asia-Pacific War(s)*, edited by T Fujitani, Geoffrey M White, and Lisa Yoneyama. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001. ISBN cloth, 0-8223-2532-2; paper, 0-8223-2564-0; vi + 462 pages, tables, photographs, notes, bibliography, filmography, index. Cloth, US\$59.95; paper, US\$19.95.

This book has its origin in a 1995 international conference marking the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II, and is part of a groundswell—or shockwave—of “memory activities” reconsidering, rewriting, and rearguing that war. The goal is to