CHAPTER 11

“RE-PIONEERING” AMERICA: Revitalizing Communities and Environmental Economics

SOLAR AS NEW SECURITY: DECENTRALIZE THE GRID

Honolulu, 2011. It was early morning. The sun had just risen, when the plane touched down at Honolulu airport. It felt so strange coming back to Hawaii where I had gone to school, coming full circle around the globe back to an America struggling with itself, desperately in search of a new idea.

Taking the airport shuttle into Waikiki, I was shocked by the changes since my student days. The old family inns that dotted the narrow streets along the lagoon were all gone. Even the charming jungle-overgrown Tahitian Lanai Inn with its carved tiki statues had been replaced by new cement developments and luxury brand chain stores.

Trump Tower loomed over it all.

On arriving at the hotel, I met one of the staff, who was a student from the University of Hawaii. He lived just off campus, at a crossroads known as Puck’s Alley, where I had lived as a student. The old neighborhood once had thriving Japanese family stores, Hawaiian lei flower shops, and local communal vegetable markets. Was it the same, or “Trumped” over like this new part of old Waikiki?

I had been invited to speak at the Asian Pacific Securities Studies Center, a branch of the US military located at Fort DeRussy, which is in Waikiki, of all places. Assembled in the room were generals from
countries across Asia: Afghanistan, Nepal, Mongolia, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

But why was I there?

Were these generals really interested in empowering people as a means of preventing violence and addressing terrorism at its root? To my surprise, most of the generals sitting in the room agreed that we need a new framework as the old one is not working anymore.

Jim Hirai, the acting executive director of the center, had invited me to the meeting. “After running all the scenarios, including water and food security issues, we find that the Himalayan Consensus may be the way forward in preventing conflict in Asia,” he explained. The whole approach was about avoiding violence rather than reacting to it. Core were resource management, which is the result of development policies, which in turn are tied to values.

I met one-on-one with Dan Leaf, the general who commanded the center, and formerly the second in command of the entire Pacific operation of the US armed forces. He asked my opinion about North Korea.

It is entirely predictable that China will invest across its border, establishing special economic zones in North Korea and outsourcing cheap production. Costs of labor in China are rising, and college graduates don’t want to work in factories. The bottom line is China will capitalize its aid. Chinese enterprises will then operate factories in the zones, and life there will gradually improve as it did in China over the past three decades. North Korea will undergo a similar transition and reform as China and Vietnam have done. The pattern seemed clear. Meanwhile, American soldiers are bunkered up behind barbed wire on the demilitarized zone. Few of them speak Korean, and locals in South Korea find their presence uncomfortable, irritating, but a necessity given the continued tensions that a warlike state of mind carries.

Looking way beyond the conflict, we see that China is South Korea’s biggest trading partner and that universities in Seoul are packed with Chinese learning Korean to bolster business ties. China business will ultimately buy stability on the Korean Peninsula, with money.

The general seemed shocked at these comments, his second in command and the aides busy taking notes.

I then asked him if the building we were sitting in used solar energy panels. Everyone in the room was silent and thought about it. No, of course not. “Then your energy comes from the grid, which means oil fired,