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In Quest of Unity: The Centralization Theme in  
Malaysian Federal-State Relations, 1957-75

by

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Growing out of a research project begun in 1962, Professor Tilman's study of the federal experience in Malaysia should be of considerable interest to students as well as others concerned with federal affairs in general and the political process in Malaysia in particular. Accordingly, let's hope "In Quest of Unity" will circulate widely and stimulate further discussion and investigation of the subject. In the meantime, while wishing Professor Tilman and his study all the best, it is clearly understood that responsibility for facts and opinions expressed in the work that follows rests exclusively with Professor Tilman and his interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views or policy of the Institute or its supporters.

28 April 1976

Director  
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies

This essay, a study of the politics, the politicians, and the laws involved in the federal experience of Malaysia, is concerned largely with the period that begins with the creation of the Federation of Malaya in 1957 and ends in 1975 with the retirement of the most recent advocate of state autonomy in the enlarged Federation of Malaysia. In brief, my thesis here is that in the constant tug-of-war between the centre and the constituent units, a characteristic of most federations and actually the core of the federal compromise, the consistent trend has been the aggrandizement of central government power gained at the expense of the states. In most cases this has been intentional, calculated, and orchestrated by national leaders. Among the state units centralization has met only isolated pockets of resistance, each of which has eventually been overcome by the superior force of the centre, a superiority that increased with each additional accretion of power.

Having made these observations, however, it must also be noted that there is no intention here to defend the infallibility of federalism, the principles of which are too frequently viewed as almost sacred and beyond the realm of discussion. Malaysian society is heterogeneous, and, in the present precarious world, unity is understandably viewed by many Malaysians as more desirable than diversity. That the federal system has been used in the quest for this unity is a matter of historical record and is the focus of this study. Whether it was properly or improperly used is a question for others to ponder on.<sup>1</sup>

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1 I am indebted to many institutions and organizations for support of my interests in this subject. More than a decade ago the American Society for International Law assisted my field research in Malaya to begin preliminary investigations into Malayan federalism, and, while many other research projects have been completed since, this study actually began in 1962. In 1974 the American Philosophical Society awarded me a grant for a brief residency at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies of the University of London, and there I was generously shown the hospitality of the Institute and given the use of its impressive documentary resources in this field. In 1975, thanks to the determined support of the then Chancellor of my home institution, the University system granted me a leave of absence during most of the fall semester. This period was spent as a Visiting Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, where I enjoyed excellent facilities and stimulating colleagues. Finally, Duke University has always been generous in granting me the use of its facilities and resources. None of these is responsible for the substance of my research, but I take this opportunity to record my appreciation to all for their assistance.

## 1: THE ECOLOGY OF FEDERALISM IN MALAYSIA

### The Physical Setting

Geography and history conspired to make Malaysia resistant to centralization, but administration and politics were sufficient to overcome both. This, in brief, describes the centralization-fragmentation struggle of the past several centuries in Malaysia.<sup>2</sup> If federalism represents the institutionalization of a balance between territorial centrifugalism and centripetalism,<sup>3</sup> then this study describes the process by which the latter yielded to the former under

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- 2 "Malaysia" has sometimes been employed to describe the peninsular and insular territories that today constitute the states of Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia, and the protected Sultanate of Brunei (the Sulu Archipelago - now a part of the Philippines - has sometimes been included in this geographic term as well). In this essay "Malaysia" will be used as an abbreviation for the Federation of Malaysia, which today includes the peninsular states of the old Federation of Malaya and the Bornean states of Sabah and Sarawak (when referring to the period prior to 1965 the term will be used also to include Singapore). "Malaya" will often be used as a short-hand term for the territory of the old Federation of Malaya - that is, the eleven states of the peninsula, the antecedent of Malaysia.
- 3 Daniel J. Elazar discusses the various - and often conflicting - interpretations of "Federalism" in his article in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1968), pp. 353-367. In general, writers have dealt mostly with the legal structures employed to "united ... separate polities within an overarching political system so as to allow each to maintain its fundamental political integrity" (Elazar's definition of "federalism"). In the end they have almost inevitably had to describe the institutionalized balance between the centrifugal and centripetal forces inherent in the system itself. For a useful broader view of federalism see William S. Livingston, *Federalism and Constitutional Change* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), chapter 1. Some observers have denied that "real federalism" exists at all in present-day Malaysia, but the system certainly seems to meet somewhat more than the minimum conditions described by William H. Riker in his *Federalism* (Boston: Little Brown, 1964), pp. 5-6. In Riker's taxonomy Malaysia would be far more "centralized" than "peripheralized," but it would still be termed a "federation". Beyond this it should be recognized that Malaysia calls itself a federation and that "federations" come in many varieties.