

# A 'foreigner' looks at Micronesia

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Editor's note: Mort Rosenblum, a writer for the Associated Press news service out of New Jersey, recently took a short trip throughout Micronesia. This is what he found.

SAIPAN, Micronesia (AP) — An oceanful of movie-set islands held together by a two-plane airline and \$60 million yearly from Washington is talking about independence from the United States. Micronesia, starting west of Hawaii and sprawling over the Pacific toward Asia, was entrusted to the United States in 1947 after American forces wrested it from Japan, island by island.

Geographically, it's like someone chopped two-thirds of Rhode Island into 2,100 pieces, sprinkled them over an area the size of the United States and peopled them with a capacity Rose Bowl crowd. Culturally, there are nine distinct languages and backgrounds, from Yap, where women cover their thighs and bare their breasts, to Kwajalein, where everyone covers their eyes because of missile firing.

Politically, American police here has produced everything from a burning hatred to a tingling admiration, causing a cavernous generation gap in some places. "WE WERE A HAPPY, SIMPLE PEOPLE, but now we have a clash between Coca-Cola and the coconut," said Carl Heine, a senior administrator from the Marshall Islands. "And we've passed the point of no return."

Under the United Nations mandate, Washington was supposed to develop the islands, prepare them for autonomy and then turn them loose. The ground rules allowed American buses to prevent a return of 1941.

Right now, a government official from Saipan can spend two weeks traveling time just to speak at a men's club luncheon. About half the population lives more than a day, by boat, away from district centers. Only Air Micronesia — known affectionately as Air Mike — and a fleet of freighters link the islands together and to the rest of the world.

There is hardly any trade or industry. Development — except for schools and health services of varying quality — is generally described as badly lacking. In Saipan, the capital island, office girls sit behind enormous but inert electric typewriters. Power is short because the plant burned down and, engineers say, someone left two huge new generators out to rust for three years awaiting installation.

But independence for the 107,000 Micronesians on their three million square miles of ocean is even more complicated than it sounds. THE MARIANAS, the most developed of the three main groups of islands, already are talking of leaving the new union — as soon as it is formed — to make their own deal with Washington.

American control permitted chunks of Bikini and Eniwetok to be demolished by nuclear tests, with original inhabitants waiting decades to go home. Micronesian and American negotiators have met five times to discuss the islands' future status. Americans came to the September session in Hawaii prepared for "free association," a form of self-rule in which Washington would handle defense and foreign affairs and have its pick of military land.

But the Micronesians suddenly asked for complete independence, and the

The Marianas include Guam, a separately governed U.S. territory which courts statehood, and its people are ethnically the same. Many Marianas say they want U.S. citizenship or at least close ties to Guam and the mainland.

As the U.S. government plans to reactivate the Tinian airfield in the Marianas from where the Enola Gay took off for Hiroshima, the island chain would be welcomed into the field.

American negotiators have agreed to meet separately with the Marianas delegation although the Trust Territory cannot be broken up until it is set free.

For some, the independence demand is simply a bargaining position. But for others, it's a serious matter.

Many Palauans feel the Pentagon's master plan takes up far too much of their idyllic but scarce land at the southwest of Micronesia, near the Philippines.

PEOPLE ON TRUK, around their 40-mile lagoon, outnumber other groups and independence would place them at the center of the islands — economically and politically, as well as geographically. When Spain's empire fell apart in 1898,

the islands were on the market. The United States took only Guam and left the rest for Germany. After World War I Japan won a League of Nations mandate. The Japanese fortified the islands and kept everyone out. Amelia Earhart, many Saipanese still swear, was executed by suspicious Japanese in 1937 after her plane was forced down.

Although islanders recall cruel punishment and forced labor, the Japanese made the tiny volcanic and coral land masses flourish. They produced minerals, sugar, copra and food crops, building roads and towns along with gun emplacements.

At one point, there were about 85,000 Japanese settlers in Micronesia, outnumbering the indigenous residents.

After the war, the U.S. Navy and the Interior Department kept an eye on the islands, spending only a few million dollars a year, mostly for running the skeleton government. "They treated us like the Indians and the buffalo," said one high-level Micronesian civil servant. "They did practically nothing here. That's why some Micronesians are now looking toward Japan. At least they made things work."

ONE THING WASHINGTON did do, in the 1960s, was bring in the Peace Corps. At the peak, there were more than 1,000 volunteers, one for every 100 islanders, exposing Micronesians to American culture. The result — apparently unintended — was a large number of politically motivated young people who pushed toward social reform while their parents clung to traditional ways.

"THE PEACE CORPS accelerated political process here by five years one mainlander with years of pub private experience in Micronesia argue some former volunteers working as contract teachers. Micronesians had not been given background to decide their own. Regardless of who is right, Mic has changed. In Yap, a nearly youth walks around the district building with a ballpoint pen stuck in his belt.

One visitor to an isolated island and asked their names. "Nixon one. "Kennedy," said the other. The heavy Americanization of Mic Japanese are returning in force. Japanese investments, usually local fronts to skirt the law, are reported coming in. Promotive tourism, considered one of the le to build the economy, is directed at Japanese honeymooners.

For years, legislators and officials Washington have paid so little attention to the islands that one congressman often quoted as saying "Mike when asked about Micronesia. NOW, WITH THE UNITED NA mandate nearing its end and countries lining up waiting, at American and Micronesian leader little more aware of each presence.