

26

# Micronesia's political future—a delicate problem for U.S.

First of two articles on the future of Micronesia, a vast, strategic area of the Pacific administered by the United States.

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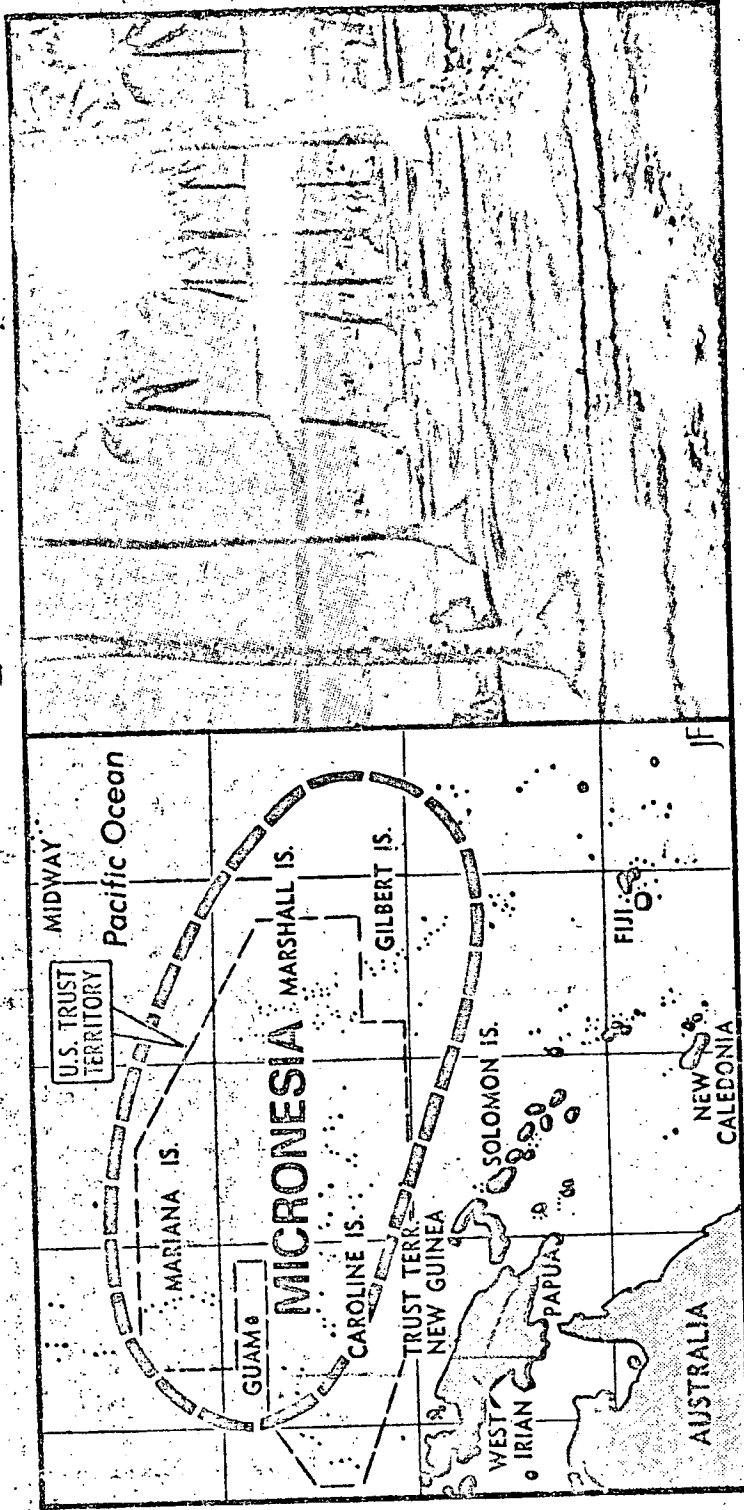
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Washington  
There are only two trust territories in the world. One is a part of Papua, New Guinea, which is moving toward independence. The other is becoming an increasingly delicate problem for the nation that administers it — the United States.

This is the United Nations Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, commonly called Micronesia and comprising some 2,000 islands and atolls flung across three million square miles of ocean. Situated on the threshold of East Asia, the region is of vital strategic importance to the United States.

Currently Micronesia and Washington are in the process of working out a new political status for the territory, as called for by the UN agreement.

\*Please turn to Page 6



By a staff cartographer; Keystone photo

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10/1

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Continued from Page 1

Bafflingly, there are two sets of negotiations. One district of Micronesia, the Mariana Islands, wants closer union with the United States, while the five other districts are seeking one of two alternatives: either a looser association with the United States or independence.

## Mission to take a look

To add to the complexities of the status talks, a four-man mission of the UN Trusteeship Council goes to Micronesia in early February to study and report back on how Americans are governing their 110,000 brown-skinned wards. For the first time in this triennial exercise the mission will include a Russian. And, if this were not a sensitive enough ingredient for Washington, the highest-ranking Chinese at the UN — Tang Ming-chao, UN undersecretary-general for trusteeship and decolonization affairs — may go along with the mission.

The Soviet Union, one of six members of the Trusteeship Council, has never made a major effort to embarrass Washington on the subject of Micronesia. But it nonetheless has never missed a chance to criticize American policy there, which U.S. officials themselves admit has been less than successful. What emerges from the mission's six-week tour of the islands will therefore be watched with more than casual interest.

Because the Micronesians themselves are not decided on what they want, the status negotiations have had a checkered history. All told, there have been six rounds of talks in three years.

At first Washington offered a commonwealth plan. This was turned down. Then,

early in 1971, President Nixon appointed a personal representative for the negotiations, and at the third round in October, 1971, the United States proposed a formula of "free association" for the islands under which the Americans would control foreign affairs and defense and the Micronesians would have responsibility for internal affairs. The Micronesian delegation seemed amenable.

Then things got complicated.

In April, 1972, the Mariana Islands District made known it wanted a closer and permanent relationship with the United States. Earlier plebiscites had supported such a tie, which would make the islanders American nationals, and petitions requesting such status had been sent to the UN.

Agreeable to this proposal, the United States in December began separate talks with the Mariana Islands. Each side now has committees working on different aspects of a compact, and the next meeting is expected to be held in April.

## Sharp curve thrown

Meanwhile, the Congress of Micronesia, the elected legislative body of all the islands, threw the United States a sharp curve by calling into question the whole basis of the negotiations. At a meeting in August, 1972, it instructed the status delegation to negotiate not only a "free association" compact but an independence option as well.

This new wrinkle has caused considerable dismay among administration officials, who feel it is difficult to work on two alternatives at once. And, although independence is seen to be totally unrealistic, the United States must have a position on the question if

Micronesians insist on this alternative.

Hence these talks now are in a state of suspension as the administration takes a hard look at the situation. While it does that, it hopes the Micronesians are pulling together their own views and coming up with a full-scale program for internal autonomy, something they have not yet done.

In a nutshell, the fundamental problem for Washington is to get an agreement that will be acceptable to the Micronesians in a plebiscite. Otherwise it is in trouble in the UN (although veto power in the Security Council assures that the United States would never lose control of the trust territory).

## Some inroads made

It is difficult to estimate the strength of the independence forces, which are only a small minority. Anywhere between 3 and 15 or so members of the 33-member Congress of Micronesia have backed independence at any one time, and radical elements have made some inroads in the local media and among the more sophisticated, trained elite.

The most vocal support for independence comes from Micronesians educated outside the territory, from Americans teaching in the islands, and from former Peace Corps volunteers. Some belong to a small group called

the Friends of Micronesia, which is based at Berkeley, Calif., and is rumored to have received money from the radical Students for a Democratic Society. The leader of the group, which is hostile to American administration of Micronesia, is a former Peace Corps volunteer.

It is felt here that some islanders are sincere in their advocacy of independence for they do not like Micronesia's involvement in U.S. defense programs. But it is also thought the issue is being used by some as an arm-twisting tactic, on the theory that U.S. defense needs are so important that Micronesia can get anything it wants.

Most Micronesians, it is believed, do not want independence, and some in fact are concerned that Washington may run off and leave them.

## Strategic value seen

The strategic value to the United States of Micronesia, which was formerly ruled by Japan, is apparent. American control denies use of the tiny islands by a third power and also serves U.S. needs. In the past nuclear tests were conducted on Bikini and Eniwetok, whose evacuated inhabitants are still waiting to go home.

At present the only significant military activity in the territory is the huge missile-tracking range at Kwajalein Atoll, where ballistic missiles fired from the continental United States land in a shimmering 50-mile-long lagoon.

In the future, with the tenure of the U.S. military limited in Taiwan, Okinawa, and perhaps even Japan, Micronesia assumes enhanced importance as a potential fallback region for at least some defense installations.

Guam, however, which is in the Mariana Islands but not a part of the trust territory, would play the greater role.

In any event, since the Micronesians, for whom land is all-important, will not grant the United States the right of eminent domain, any future political compact must specify what rights the United States will have in Micronesian lands and waters.

On this tender subject the two sides in July reached a tentative agreement on U.S. requirements. These, in addition to the facilities in the Marshalls, include land in the Palua Islands for an airfield and for training and maneuvers of ground forces, acreage which the United States would rent on an ad hoc basis.