

# Micronesia: world's stepchild ren want freedom of sorts

By ROBERT C. MILLER

SAIPAN (UPI) — The Micronesians, stepchildren of the world, want their feet out from under America's table and their freedom and independence.

Well, almost free, and not quite independent, for the 100,000 people in the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands hope the United States will keep a candle burning in the window, along with an open check-book.

FOR MORE than 20 years the Yapese, Marshallese, Palauans, Trukese and Ponapeans have been the wards of Washington's Interior Department under an American trusteeship of the 1,214 Pacific islands demanded from the United Nations in 1947.

For the first five years of American stewardship the Pacific islanders belonged to the Defense Department. The Defense Department inherited them from the Japanese at the end of World War II.

They had been wards of Tokyo for the previous 30 years after adoption papers were taken at gunpoint from the Germans in the first weeks of World War I.

The Germans paid the Spaniards about \$4.2 million for the right to rule Micronesia for the 15 years prior to 1914.

The Spaniards claimed the original ownership of Micronesian souls; they "discovered" the islands in the 16th century.

NO ATTENTION, of course, was ever paid the Micronesian complaints that their title to the 700-square miles of land immersed in three-million

square miles of ocean went back to 1500 B.C. when they "discovered" the islands after migrating from Southeast Asia.

The strategic location of the Marianas — just north of Guam — kept them under the wing of the Defense Department until 1962 because of the Korean War.

The strategic location of Micronesia in the Southwest Pacific has been their lure. The islands are within striking distance of just about any point in the Pacific. Over the years every admiral and general worth his campaign ribbons has drooled at the prospect of occupying them. There has been more salivating than usual in the Pentagon since America lost her advance bases in Asia.

THE AMERICANS are the only foster parents who promised to "prepare" the Micronesians for independence, and four meetings have been held in the last year by the two groups to examine the preparedness program. Both sides agreed to disagree at the Hawaii meeting and recessed the political status talks on Oct. 6, for an indefinite "pause."

Neither group was able to find a catalyst that would blend oil with water.

The Americans insist that, for the usual "strategic" reasons, they need a few thousand acres of Micronesia's precious land for airfields, training facilities and bases. They want the Marianas — Saipan, Tinian, Rota and the smaller islands — eliminated from any independent Micronesia agreement because of their airfields and "strategic" location.

But Washington has also hinted that a large hunk of

the Palauan island of Babelthuap will be needed as a guerrilla training ground.

THERE ARE no anguished wails from the Micronesian delegates over the Marianas; a November 1969 plebiscite by some 3,000 of the Marianas' 5,000 eligible voters showed a overwhelming majority favoring reintegration with Guam or some other form of American association. Only 19 voted for independence.

But Babelthuap, the largest island in the Palau, is a different matter. Palauan legislator George Ngisae-saol said his constituents are "absolutely opposed to giving up one acre of Babelthuap for a guerrilla training ground or any other reason."

The Americans say they are completely mystified as to whether the Micronesians want independence, a free-association agreement with the United States, commonwealth status, or just what. Washington also confesses sheepishly that there are wide differences of opinion between Interior and the Pentagon on just what the United States wants.

MICRONESIAN congressman Tarkong K. Pedro points out that Micronesia is 1,300 miles wide and 2,300 miles long, populated with at least six definite ethnic groups, and with no common language and dozens of different dialects — some, like Truk, within the same atoll.

"Before we start worrying about whether we want independence or free association, we must figure out how how we, as divergent peoples, are going to govern ourselves," Pedro said.

"The Palauans don't want the Trukese telling them what to do, and the Yapese have never trusted the Palauans. The Marshallese are 2,000 miles away with an entirely different set of problems and little in common with those of us from the Caroline Islands."

AFTER five political status talks the Americans thought they had hammered out a "free association" compact that the Micronesian delegates would recommend to the Micronesian Congress as an acceptable arrangement, eliminating the United States as the trustee for Micronesia, but allowing the Americans to handle Micronesia's foreign affairs and security.

But between the fifth and sixth meetings, the Micronesian Congress met in Ponape and ordered their negotiators "to conduct negotiations with the United States regarding the establishment of Micronesia as an independent nation while continuing negotiations toward free association."

MANY Micronesians feel the "Free Micronesia" idea was inspired by idealistic members of the Peace Corps, liberal American teachers and bureaucrats who felt that Micronesia should be completely divorced from the United States and that no American military bases should be allowed in the islands. They reportedly bent the ears of the more susceptible congressmen and pushed through the independence resolution.

Senator Lazarus Salii denies this, and said at the

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September-October talks in Hawaii that any plebiscite submitted to the Micronesians must include a choice of more than one "political alternative." He argued that his people should not be asked to accept or reject the free-association proposal, but should be given a chance to vote on whether they want an apron string separation from the United States or a final divorce.

That's when both sides agreed to adjourn the Hawaii talks until the dust settled.

**THE MICRONESIAN** elections in November did little to focus the picture. Independence advocates on Truk and Ponape were beaten, and most of the congressional delegates favoring free association were reelected.

Businessman Joseph Tamag of Yap thinks those championing independence are dreamers who ignore the facts of life.

"The independence candidates were defeated," Tamag said, "because the people started asking them questions they couldn't answer — like where is the money coming from? Who is to pay the bills? Where do we get the \$60 million the Americans are now spending to run Micronesia and educate our kids?"

"Besides, how can anyone be stupid enough to think the Americans are going to pull out of Micronesia and leave the place up for grabs to anybody who comes along—like the Russians or the Japanese.

"Never happen."