

## Micronesia

The United States is mulling its first significant territorial acquisition since it bought the Virgin Islands in 1916. The territory is 14 islands of the Marianas, one of three archipelagos constituting Micronesia, the far-flung western Pacific domain which the United States has administered as a United Nations trust territory since the defeat of Japan in World War II. (Guam, part of the Marianas, has been a U.S. territory since the Spanish-American war.) Micronesia's two other archipelagos, the Caroline and Marshall Islands, have been engaged in talks with Washington pointing toward a halfway-house status called "free association," including an option for full independence at a later time. But the Marianas, which are negotiating separately, seek to replace the American trusteeship with a permanent political tie to the United States—called "commonwealth." Both the people of the Marianas and the Congress would have to approve.

The Marianas—an area of 183 square miles, population 14,000—have an understandable interest in negotiating the terms of their entry into the American family. Everything depends on it; "divorce" is quite beyond imagining. They have two cards: They can offer the United States sites for additional post-Vietnam "fallback" air and naval bases, principally at Tinian, although it is far from clear why the major military facilities already existing at Guam, barely 100 miles away, will not do for the Pentagon. They know as well that the United States, which next year will be left as the last of the 11 UN colonial administrators named after the war, wishes to end its anachronistic

role as trustee and to end the trusteeship in a way acceptable to the United Nations. The American intent is to wait until new relationships have been found with all parts of Micronesia before taking the package to the United Nations. Just how Russia and China (not to speak of other third-world states) will react to a continuing American political role in Micronesia, perhaps involving an expanded military role, will be interesting.

Of the talks with the Carolines and Marshalls, Post correspondent Don Oberdorfer wrote from the scene last spring; "U.S.-Micronesian 'future political status' negotiations appear to be approaching a critical point. The U.S. government, which has been adamant until now about maintaining complete military control over this vast coconut-and-coral empire, has met growing resistance from island leaders who have taken to heart American-taught concepts of political freedom and self-determination." The vulnerability, special history, small size and huge spread of the Carolines and Marshalls sets them apart from the many other colonies which have become nations since the war. The people who live there have even better reason to understand this than do Americans. As a trustee, the United States has, nonetheless, a special responsibility to leave the Micronesians in a situation of promise and dignity. No obsolete conception of the "strategic" value of Micronesia should be allowed to stand in the way of fulfilling this vexing responsibility. That the Marianas seem eager to enter an American strategic embrace, even while the Carolines and Marshalls try to loosen it, indicates how difficult the over-all question of "future political status" will be.