

Towards Independence...

4-17-74

Sometime between August 1, 1974, and July 30, 1975, a most critical event for the islands will occur. That would be a Constitutional Convention for the United States Trust Territory of the Pacific, at which the islanders themselves will draw up their own government.

The constitutional convention bill was signed into law several weeks ago by Deputy High Commissioner Peter T. Coleman in a historic ceremony in Saipan. The signing was not only important for the Micronesians, but also for the U.S. government as the administering authority. At last the United States can go before the United Nations without hanging its head to proclaim that the people of the Pacific are working on the framework of their own government. In fact, the U.S. Congress and the Department of Interior are providing for much of the funding of the convention. Many observers of Micronesia feel that the constitutional convention bill was the most important piece of legislation drafted by the Congress of Micronesia in years. We agree.

The session has been set for 90 days, within that year period, a time frame that we think is much too short. This is eased, however, by provisions of the law which calls for a pre-convention committee to meet prior to July 31 this year to formulate the groundwork for the actual convention. The mandate of the convention is to draft a constitution for the future government of Micronesia, with adequate provisions for the exercise of legislative, judicial and executive functions in any form that permits free democratic expression of the views of the people. After the constitution is drafted it will be sent to the people for a referendum, to either approve or disapprove it. If approved it will provide the basic outlines for the government of Micronesia.

By law the convention will have 60 delegates, all Micronesian citizens. Forty-two of the delegates are to be selected by popular vote in an important election on June 4th. These will include four from the Marianas; nine from the Marshalls, five from Palau; nine from Ponape; 12 from Truk; and three from Yap. Besides this, each district delegation to the Congress of Micronesia will appoint one of its members to serve in the convention, or a total of six from the Congress, and finally, 12-non-voting delegates, two from each district are to be selected by traditional chiefs. This could constitute a minor problem in the Marianas, where there are no real traditional chiefs.

The Task Force who worked to get the convention bill approved has emphasized the fact that "the convention is not to be confused with the present negotiations" now being held between Micronesia and the United States on future status. The point is that these negotiations are aimed at settling external affairs, while the convention deals with internal affairs. This, however, seems confusing. There is no real way in which the convention can ignore the status talks, which are dealing with a myriad of things, including funding. The convention also has another unique hurdle facing it--that of the Marianas separation, and possibly the Marshalls separation. The Marianas will be represented at the convention by delegates, and yet they are working towards a separate agreement with the U.S. at precisely the same time.

There will be problems, many, many problems for the convention, and yet we're inclined to agree with the Task Force's assessment that this is "a great step towards more self-government in Micronesia." More power to them. JCM.