

US buys itself a Pacific colony

by Martin Woollacott in Hong Kong

The Pacific, among whose thousands of islands are most of France's and Britain's remaining dependencies, has long been one of the last refuges of colonialism. But it is still a curious fact that two centuries after the destructive process of Western occupation of the islands began the United States is now preparing to cut itself a final slice of the Pacific pie.

The slice in question consists of the Marianas, a chain of 14 small islands north of Guam, in the Southwest Pacific. The Marianas are one of several island groups which make up the UN trust territory of Micronesia, which the US has administered since it took the islands from the Japanese during the Second World War.

The terms of the UN trusteeship naturally charge the US with the responsibility of advancing the entire territory, which includes more than 2,000 islands, towards self-government. Negotiations to this end began about a year ago.

The "solution" now emerging, according to recent reports from Saipan, capital of the trust territory and the Marianas, is that the Marianas will be permanently associated with the US as a "commonwealth," a status similar to that of Puerto Rico, while other arrangements, presumably for independence of sorts, will be made for the rest of Micronesia.

There is little doubt that most of the 14,000 inhabitants of the Marianas want a deal of this kind, since it would guarantee them living standards otherwise unattainable, even though it amounts to cultural suicide.

Washington has apparently offered this tiny community something like \$6 millions a year for the first seven years. This generosity naturally springs from self-interest since the US, which has used (or abused) its trusteeship for nuclear testing and antiballistic missile

testings, wants to retain the Marianas for forward military and naval deployment.

The rest of Micronesia, which means most of the islands and most of the population, has no doubt been offered a less substantial dowry for independence than the Marianas are being offered for their sacrifice.

In the case of the Marianas, the value is strategic. Guam, geographically part of the Marianas although culturally more akin to the Philippines and a US possession since the conquest of those islands from Spain, is already developed as a major base.

The Guam strategy in a negative sense demands that none of the island group north of it should pass into hostile hands, and the best way of preventing this is to continue to hold the entire group.

In addition, the other Marianas give the US the option of developing alternative and complementary facilities for its ships and aircraft. The Pentagon has for some time had plans to build a large base on Tinian, one of the islands, for these very reasons.

Finally, the problems inherent in maintaining military bases in other countries continue to make island bases attractive to naval and air planners.

The parallel with Diego Garcia is an obvious one. In that case it was we British who detached a scattering of unrelated Indian Ocean islands, christening them the British Indian Ocean Territory, because we thought they might have strategic value in the future for ourselves and the Americans.

What the US seems to be trying to do now in Micronesia is essentially the same thing, except that unfortunately the Marshalls, unlike Diego Garcia, do have a population, albeit a meagre one. Also, the people of Micronesia as a whole might reasonably regard the strategic value of the Marianas as an asset

for which a rent is due to all and not just to the "lucky" 14,000 who happen to live there.

In mitigation, it should be said that Micronesia would be a headache for the most sincere of decolonisers. In terms of its huge physical extent — covering an ocean area 3,000 miles long by 2,000 miles wide — Micronesia is one of

the three great culture sectors of the Pacific island world.

The US earlier made some efforts to encourage an integrated approach, setting up an elected congress of Micronesia, which was not a great success. The prospects for an independent federation of the whole of Micronesia thus never looked good. If the US goes ahead

and detaches the Marianas, citing the democratic views of 14,000 islanders, they will of course disappear entirely.

It is curious that the US, as opposed as the rest of us to the myth of the so-called overseas territory when practised by the Portuguese or the French, should follow a policy not so different in its own affairs.

