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**DEFENCE**

# Uncle Sam: Building coral castles

By Saul Lockhart

THE American public blithely went about its business two weeks ago almost totally unaware of an election which could effect the country as a whole. The voting was some 6,500 miles west of San Francisco in what is officially called the Trust Territory of the Pacific. American Micronesia or just the TT (to the bureaucrats stationed there) are other terms for about 2,100 islands, mainly coral atolls, spread across more than 3 million square miles, over which the US fought many a bloody battle with the Japanese during World War II.

But in Washington, voting interest was high among a group of policymakers. And interest turned to absolute delight when the Northern Marianas voted to split from the other five districts in the territory — which the US holds under a 1947 UN trusteeship — and join the US with commonwealth status (*à la* Puerto Rico).

The reason for Washington's interest lies in the realms of defence. The US defence perimeter in Asia shrank after the recent political and military reverses, but the scattered islands of the TT provide an alternative. It will be a defence line where one does not have to put up with the vagaries of Asian nationalism and politics. It is America, yet is only 1,500 miles from Japan.

Specifically, the US Air Force (USAF) will now get almost two-thirds of Tinian Island (from where two B-29 bombers called the "Enola Gay" and

vote in favour of the covenant before it could be presented to the US Congress for ratification. In fact, over 80% voted Yes.

Original USAF plans called for a \$300 million-\$400 million installation on Tinian. This has been severely cut back in budget debates — it is being said that the money is needed for installations on Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean — but the base will have the capability of being expanded at short notice.

Of the other five districts making up the TT, a similar referendum on status is due this month. In this case, the US is pushing for a "free association" status.

Washington's keen interest in these islands (the Marshall and Caroline groups) is again in the defensive sphere. Kwajalein atoll, in the Marshalls, houses a missile direction detection system, while both the USN and the Marine Corps are interested in Palau. The TT initiatives were not, however, decided upon at the spur of the moment. The US has been putting in increasing amounts of money into the islands since far-sighted policymakers realised the strategic value of the area. For many years the budgetary limit was \$7.5 million. In fiscal year 1963, it was raised to \$17.5 million, to \$25 million in 1967, \$50 million in 1970, while the 1976 proposal is for \$81 million.

The Micronesians left out of the commonwealth deal are not really that angry at the plebiscite result. Rather, they are perturbed that they have lost one of their most important bargaining chips: Most of the economic muscle came from Saipan and Tinian.

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