

U.S. in No Mood To Give Up Micronesia...

The Micronesians may have had their chance for independence and let it slip through their fingers.

We're not blaming them, because it would have been an incredible bit of luck and political skill to have been able to pull it off against so formidable an opponent as the U.S. government.

A combination of the Arab-Israeli war of several years ago and the world shortage of minerals worked against the Micronesians.

How?

A few years ago, when talks between the Micronesians and the Americans were nearing completion, the U.S. was under strong pressure by the United Nations to terminate the Pacific Trust Territory. Given the right circumstances the American people might have bought the idea of free association by the Micronesians. Most Americans at least profess to believe strongly in the concept of independence.

But just about at the peak of the talks came the Arab-Israeli war and the resulting oil embargo to the U.S. (The shock waves of this action still are reaching out.) The concern of the U.S. immediately became one of protecting what we had in the way of mineral and ocean resources.

Instead of pulling back the American leaders almost overnight decided to reach out and consolidate what we had in the way of resources, ocean resources included.

Suddenly the dream of the Micronesians was shattered. Again, history was against them, as it has been so often with the myriad of foreign conquerors. The U.S. needs Micronesia and the ocean of foreign surrounding it. We need it for the mineral and oil wealth it contains. We need it for the fish that swim around the Micronesian islands. We need Micronesia for defense purposes, as a key point for air, communication bases, submarine and missile bases.

We don't want to be the first to bear the Micronesians this bad news. They probably have figured it out for themselves anyway. And, of course, we could be wrong. We have been before. But our assessment of the Western Pacific scene is that the American leaders, enforced by their constituents, the American people, are in no mood to give up an inch of what is nominally American soil or water. (That goes for the Panama Canal Zone, Alaska or even American Samoa.)

We're sure that the Micronesians can argue over that term "American soil." We're not saying that this new turn of events is right or fair, but we are saying that world conditions have changed dramatically since the Arab-Israeli war and we're just trying to be realistic in our assessment.

We're basing our new beliefs on several factors.

The first was the Marianas breakaway, the first split in the Micronesian wall.

The second is the proposed split of the Palauan islands.

The third is the almost-total collapse of the talks between America and Micronesia.

There haven't been any political-status talks in two years and, as far as we know, there aren't any plans to renew them.

America's new strategy probably has been influenced, at least to a degree, by the Soviet Union. The Russians aren't about to give up the northern islands to the Japanese. Yet the U.S., in its generosity, gave up first the Bonins and then Okinawa, and despite our closeness now with the Japanese there are many in the U.S. who hope that we won't be so agreeable in the future.

The Panama Canal situation isn't a great deal different from Micronesia's. We didn't take the Panama zone by force, even though we could have done so easily against weak or nonexistent Spanish American republics. Panama, like Micronesia, wasn't even a nation when the U.S. moved in. Now Panama, like Micronesia, wants to assert its rightful role over its land. The U.S. Congress, however, is arching its back over any treaty that would curtail U.S. rights in Panama.

We see this as a very definite clue that the same sort of thing would happen if the Micronesians were able to get to a treaty stage. Many congressmen would oppose Micronesian independence. In fact, right now they probably would be in a majority.

While much of this is political, and much of it is based on defense, we believe that the key to the dissipation of any chance of Micronesian independence lies in the area of economics.

Even today, as we're writing this, more than 4,000 delegates, experts and lobbyists have converged on United Nations headquarters in New York for the third Conference on the Law of the Sea.

In yesterday's Daily News a United Press International story reported that the convention will assign ownership to the more than 1,500 billion barrels of oil believed to lie offshore and the more than \$3,000 billion worth of minerals in the North Pacific alone.

Bids for a share of these riches will be advanced by delegates from 156 nations and regions.

Does anybody imagine that the United States will give up one bit of this potential treasure? Not without a fight. And the Micronesians are in no position to fight the United States.

As a matter of fact, it can be argued that U.S. control of the islands might be far better for Micronesians in the long run. The U.S. — at least — is in a position to develop the mineral riches of the North Pacific, while the Micronesians could not. And without U.S. protection the North Pacific and Micronesia again could become a battleground for nations trying to gain the wealth of the sea.

Another clue to U.S. intentions about Micronesia came from efforts by the state department to include Micronesia with other U.S. territories and possessions in a fisheries-management bill before Congress. The measure — the Magnuson Fisheries Management and Conservation Act — would block Micronesian control over tuna and other migratory fish beyond the present 12-mile limit. The Congress of Micronesia, in direct opposition, favors full control over all resources in a proposed 200-mile "economic zone."

Here we see a case where the mother country — the U.S. — is going completely against the wishes of one of its children in this case, Micronesia.

All the factors — taken all together — the politics, the military, the economics and the Soviet Union's increasing military capability, not only in the Pacific but throughout the world — lead us to believe that Micronesia has lost its chance for independence.

In a way that saddens us, because we believe so strongly in the right of people to choose their own government.

The Micronesians never have had that opportunity, and may not get it now. JCM.