

TALES OF THE PACIFIC

by Patricia Luce Chapman

The American "strategic trusteeship" of Micronesia, awarded by the United Nations after the Japanese defeat in World War II, is today giving way to a new political status for the islands. Tucked under the wing of the Federal Government since 1947—first as a ward of the Navy and then of the Interior Department—the two thousand islands and atolls extending over three million-square miles of the Western Pacific are familiar only to those Americans old enough to have followed news of the war in the Pacific and of early A-bomb tests.

The Micronesian chain begins with the Marshalls, 2,200 miles southwest of Hawaii—Bikini, Eniwetok, and Kwajalein are here—and ends with the U.S. Territory of Guam, 1,600 mile east of Manila. To the west of the Marshalls are the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM)—Truk and Yap among them. Above Guam stretch the islands of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), and below, the Republic of Palau.

All but one of the island groups have opted for free association with the United States, a relationship that offers sovereignty in everything but defense matters for a trial period of fifteen years—fifty in Palau's case— and foreign aid for the same period.

The process began well over a decade ago. A number of plebiscites were held in which the islanders—of which there are about 100,000 in all—indicated the type of political status they would prefer. In 1969, what was then the Congress of Micronesia drafted a federal constitution to unite the widely scattered islands and diverse peoples and formally proposed a future "free association" status with the United States, turning aside independence or commonwealth status.

In the plebiscite that followed, only the Northern Marianas, which had repeatedly approved close union with the United States, rejected the constitution and the proposal. Their request for commonwealth status was approved by the United States in 1975. The peoples of Yap, Truk, Ponape, and Kosrae approved both the constitution and free association and are known today as the Federated States of Micronesia. The Marshallese and Palauans preferred to go their own way as republics but opted too for free association. From 1971, when the U.S. agreed to negotiate on the Micronesian Congress's proposal, until June, 1983, when the last agreements were signed in the

Marshalls, the terms of free association were hammered out. The result is a Compact of Free Association with Bilateral Agreements specific to each party. Palau and the FSM already have held plebiscites that approved the Compact. If the Marshallese say "Yea" as well in a vote set for September 7, the United States will begin to act on the new relationship. It will then be time for the United Nations to terminate the trusteeship.

For the United States the main concern was that Micronesia's three million-square miles of Western Pacific be closed to any third country for military purposes, a provision which is written in the Compact. The U.S. was also unswerving in its insistence on preserving the Kwajalein Missile Range in the Marshalls and maintaining other contingency defense options, especially in Palau, whose geographical location gives it strategic significance in protecting vital Western interests.

It was this latter provision of the Compact that caused much of the flurry that attended the first plebiscite on the Compact of Free Association scheduled for last February 10—and may yet disrupt the upcoming one in the Marshalls. The Palauans, protective of an exceptionally beautiful environment, had included in their constitution a clause banning all harmful substances from their lands and waters—in effect, proclaiming a nuclear-free zone. The United States, however, in the portion of the Compact guaranteeing the defense of Palau, was unable to declare that it would not introduce nuclear materials into the area. This conflict was presented to the voters on their plebiscite ballot. Approval of the Compact itself required a simple majority; but the "nuclear question" involved a constitutional issue, and 75 per cent of all voters were required to approve the language of this section for it to carry.

The conflict, and the provision for U.S. contingency defense options in Palau, attracted nonislanders to Palau in the months before the voting took place. The Palauan concern about the possible military uses of its scarce land and nuclear accident was fueled to the point of fear about the "real" U.S. intentions for the area. An article in the Sunday supplement *Parade* was widely read, and there were newsletters and statements by farflung church groups and antinuclear organizations. By October, 1982, an anti-American campaign was in full swing and included not only a spate of articles and editorials but even a book that, though sizable, was distributed free of charge. (There were some on the islands who contended that Communist money, however well laundered, was responsible for much of the

anti-Compact agitation in Palau.) The campaign reached its peak two nights before the plebiscite with a televised "documentary" purporting to explain the nuances of the Compact and featuring such images as mushroom clouds and a bomb-blasted Bikini.

Palauans approved the Compact by 62 per cent, despite the intensive lobbying against it; the vote seems, to some extent, a backlash response to such meddling. For the separate "nuclear question" on the ballot, however, there was only 51 per cent approval, short of the required 75.

A separate government-to-government international agreement, signed by negotiators on July 1, provides a framework for resolution of the conflict. However, a lawsuit over the validity of the Palauan constitutional process itself, which was filed before that date, is still pending.

The second plebiscite was held in the Federated States of Micronesia on June 21. Here the governors succeeded in keeping out nonresident activists, and, in any event, there were no special issues to engage the FSM. Close to 80 per cent of its voters approved free association, which now awaits final approval by three of the FSM's four state legislatures and by ten FSM congressmen.

The final plebiscite is scheduled for September 7 in the Marshalls. The thorniest issue—that of claims against the United States arising from its nuclear tests of the '40s and '50s (referred to as Section 177)—was resolved in a process of review and intensive negotiation under the leadership of Marshalls President Amata Kabua and U.S. Ambassador Fred M. Zeder II. In brief, it provides for \$150 million to be paid on the effective date of the Compact. This will be invested by the Marshalls in a trust that can return \$18 million a year for annual payments to those affected by the tests, for a sophisticated medical program, and for a

Nan Madol in Ponape is an architectural and engineering achievement on a par with Angkor Wat and Machu Pichu. Once a Micronesian Venice with over eighty artificial islands made of immense basalt crystal logs, its chambers and baths have been taken over by jungles of mangrove and palms, its tombs desecrated, its canals silted over. The National Park Service and the Trust Territory Historic Preservation Department have undertaken to clear and preserve this record of an extraordinary eleventh-century civilization and other historic sites throughout Micronesia. But after free association, the new nations will have few resources to spare for such projects.

While U.S. aid guarantees that the islanders will be able to maintain essential services, they will need help in coping with the changes and demands of self-development. Cultural affairs are only a small part of a list that includes medicine, communications, business, specialized education, and family services.

A new nonpolitical, nonsectarian private organization, the Micronesia Institute, was founded recently in Washington, D.C., to bring Micronesia and its needs to the attention of U.S. foundations, corporations, and private individuals. The Institute plans to work along with Micronesians in the various countries to develop programs that the islanders consider appropriate and important and that can be carried on by the new states themselves.

Although the Institute is without formal offices as yet, enquiries may be addressed to: The Micronesia Institute, c/o Chapman, 2152 Wyoming Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C., or c/o Dr. Sigeru Singeo, P.O. Box 121, Kolonia, Ponape, FSM 96941.

tribunal to hear possible future claims.

Of course compensation cannot erase memory, and the nuclear past will never be far from Marshallese minds. But these islands' freely elected president and other local leaders have begun to campaign for the Compact—an indication that they are satisfied that the terms it offers the Marshallese are at least adequate for relocation and for present and future health care.

It is in the nature of democratic politics that political factions in the Marshalls will exploit existing tensions. There are also non-Marshallese church groups and lawyers who have begun to evince interest in the radiation-compensation issue, which has occupied the Marshallese for years. Among these is a group of Stateside lawyers who came upon the scene when compensation funds were already in sight—the result of years of effort by others. Managing to find some clients for themselves, they are attempting to set up a \$100 million personal-injury fund that they, and not the Marshalls government, would administer. They are opposing the Compact.

Whether all this develops into a Palau-type lobbying effort, with the addition of ambulance-chasing lawyers, remains to be seen. It is hoped by the Marshallese, who must live with the outcome, that they will be permitted to deliberate the Compact in relative calm before going to the polls this month.

SAFE PASSAGE

Most of Micronesia's elected leaders look on free association as a stepping stone to complete self-sufficiency and independence; with the U.S. ensuring an economic lifeline and military security, they will be able to develop their new governments and their resources. Yet, while optimistic, most are also aware that a good many citizens, having chosen independence over close ties with the U.S., do not fully understand the responsibilities that accompany independence. Much can happen in fifteen years.

Among the present problems is a generation gap in language and education. Although English is the common language for multilingual Micronesia, those now over sixty grew up under the Japanese occupation and speak English badly. There is a paucity of technical skills among those who do speak English and also a paucity of job opportunities. Even those who have benefited most from U.S. education programs are usually to be found working for the island governments, often for want of other employment. With free association as a safety net, the islands hope that they can develop their marine resources, tourism, copra production, and agriculture and eventually achieve self-sufficiency. At the same time, they express the hope of preserving ancient skills and traditions. There are many gaps to fill before such plans can get well underway.

After the Marshallese plebiscite this September, the review process in the U.S. Congress will begin. President Reagan has wholeheartedly endorsed free association and will urge it be approved for those countries that have voted acceptance of the Compact and resolved any internal problems it may have raised. Approval by the Congress is expected. The Compact, the result of a decade of good will, hard work, intelligence, compromise, humor, and, above all, idealism tempered by realism, does hold the promise of permitting the Micronesian islanders to make a safe crossing from servitude to self-government. [WV]