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Micronesia's Status Presents Problem

By Spencer Rich

Micronesia, a group of 2100 islands spread over a vast ocean territory in the Pacific, is becoming a problem for the United States because of its trusteeship status under US administration.

Secretary of the Interior Walter J. Hickel is scheduled to leave for Micronesia today to try to convince the islanders that their brightest future lies in continuing within the US orbit.

Some of the most famous battles of World War II took place at Micronesian islands like Saipan and Tinian, 1480 miles east of Manila. The US atom bomb tests of the 1940s and 1950s were held at Bikini Atoll, another Micronesian island 1200 miles farther east. But few Americans have given Micronesia much thought since then, and it remains a poor area with limited self-government and dubious economic prospects.

ADMINISTERED BY U.S.

For the past 21 years, the one-time Spanish, German and (most recently) Japanese colony has been administered by the United States as the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands under a unique United Nations trusteeship arrangement.

It gives the United States the right to have military bases in the area and places decisions about the trusteeship in the Security Council, where the United States has a veto.

The trusteeship arrangement obliges the United States at some time to permit the Micronesians to decide whether they want independence or continued association with the United States.

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The only important installation at present is the Kwajalein missile test site, but with the future status of US Pacific bases like Okinawa in doubt, the Micronesian islands would be a logical fallback position for US military installations when needed -- provided the 94,000 islanders choose continued association with the United States.

For this reason and because the Nation takes seriously its obligation to improve the conditions of Micronesian life, officials said, the United States increasingly has been looking for ways to upgrade Micronesia's economy and to give the area more self-government.

PLEBISCITE TO BE HELD

Hickel's trip and the appointment of a new High Commissioner of the Trust Territory, Ed Johnston of Hawaii, are directly related to these objectives. The United States wants to make a concerted effort to win over the population before a plebiscite to determine the area's future status is held. Once contemplated for 1972, the date of the plebiscite is now indefinite, but may be sooner.

Hickel while in Micronesia or shortly after his return is expected to announce some major economic development plan for the area and set forth some timetable for giving Micronesia more self-government -- perhaps a locally elected territorial governor and legislature with substantial powers within a decade.

It is expected that the Micronesians will be invited to help work out the new form of government, which would place the area in permanent association with the US. A plebiscite to approve the final product would then be held. It would not offer the Micronesians a choice between independence and the new form of government -- only a yes or no vote on the new government.

A favorable vote would enable the US to tell the UN that the Micronesians had chosen to remain with the United States, permanently, and that no further plebiscites to offer them independence were necessary.

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At present, the governor (High Commissioner) is appointed by the President of the United States, subject to Senate confirmation. The locally elected legislature has few powers -- for example, it controls the spending only of locally raised revenues (about \$1 million a year), while Congress and the High Commissioner dispose of Federal appropriations totalling about 30 times that.

The High Commissioner can veto acts of the local legislature, veto them again if "overridden" and then send the matter on to the Secretary of the Interior for final disposition.

Although there are several different opinions, sentiment in US Government agencies favors having the Micronesians eventually associate permanently with the United States.

MOIST TROPICAL CLIMATE

Micronesia is a poor area, with a hot, moist tropical climate and dense jungles in some areas. Its six major districts -- which include the Marianas, the Marshall Islands, Truk, Yap, Ponape and Palau -- are spread over 3 million square miles of ocean, an area the size of the continental US, but the islands include only 700 square miles of land.

Interior officials say there is no strong independence movement in the islands, but a great deal of uncertainty among the islanders on their future status. The island's central legislature, the Congress of Micronesia, has appointed a commission to explore the alternatives. Its chairman is Lazarus Salii of Palau, who was reported as saying recently that he favors a continued form of association with the United States, but with greater local self-government for the Micronesians.

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