

Editorial

The Land Question.....

The question of land, and land ownership, the stickiest of all problems, may be on the way to settlement in Micronesia, thus opening the way for Status Talks to continue, and possibly, for the resolution of the entire Micronesian future.

Mary Vance Trent, State Department Liaison Officer, released copies of a new United States policy paper on the eventual transfer of public lands from the Trust Territory government to the districts of Micronesia. Miss Trent says that the paper "shows the U.S.' willingness to let the Micronesians decide what they want to do with their public lands as a move towards self-government."

That is a momentous step in a group of islands in which more than 60 percent of the land is now controlled by the Trust Territory administration. It seems to show that the U.S. is sincere in first, getting the talks started again, and second, eventually turning over the islands to the people who live on them.

"The United States as administering authority of the Trust Territory has always considered public lands as property held in trust for the people of Micronesia," Miss Trent said. Generally, the U.S. has been pretty good about this, but there are exceptions. We can't say that we really held the land of Kwajalein and Eniwetok or Bikini in trust for the people of the islands. We can't say that when the administration allowed private hotels to be built on public lands that we were keeping the land in trust for the people. We can't say, when we look at our military needs in Tinian, or in Palau, that we are holding the land in trust for the people.

And, the paper pointed out that the U.S. position paper applied to all public lands in Micronesia—except those military retention lands presently under negotiation, principally in the Marianas.

Still, the position paper came as a welcome surprise. It was believed that the land question would be one of those things to be discussed at the next talks, due in Washington on Nov. 13. Now, what the U.S. is doing is requesting the legislature in each district to formally indicate the wishes of the people in the districts to decide what they want done with the lands—to see if they want the administration to turn over the lands, and if so, to whom and when. Each district might decide separately, according to local habits and customs. In Palau, for instance, the traditional chiefs may want the lands put under their control.

Important also, Miss Trent disclosed that the paper provides for a land cadastral evaluation program to be completed in three years under the direction of the Trust Territory administration—presumably indicating that funds for the program would also be provided by the federal government.

We think it is an important step for the United States to take in the Pacific islands. It could mean the defusing of one dangerous problem. JCM.