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Statehood Reluctance

It is 15 years this month since Hawaii became the 50th state of the Union, and it now looks as though it will be many more years than 15 before the 51st is admitted.

The potential candidates for No. 51 honors are looking the other way.

A joint U.S.-Puerto Rico Ad Hoc Committee is at work studying means of improving Puerto Rico's commonwealth ties with the U.S., and this effort, if successful, will probably diminish both the Statehood movement in Puerto Rico and the weak independence movement.

Guam, the other chief contender for No. 51, is showing equal disinterest in Statehood, and an increased appetite for a commonwealth arrangement of its own.

Guam's interest is being whetted by the U.S. negotiations for a commonwealth status covering its sister islands in the Marianas. These islands want to break away from Micronesia and join the U.S. permanently. The U.S. is actively interested because it wants Tinian for a major military base, to replace those it will be giving up in Okinawa and mainland Japan.

The U.S. is offering the Northern Marianas internal self-government, U.S. citizenship, participation in federal assistance programs plus a grant of \$13.5 million a year for seven transitional years - or around \$1,000 a year for every resident of the district.

Political leaders on Guam think their neighbor may be getting a better deal than they have, and are interested in renegotiating their status accordingly. Through Ambassador Haydn Williams, who is negotiating the Marianas agreement, Washington has said it is agreeable.

Principal issues are likely to be the extent of federal aid and control of immigration. There is a good bit of rancor on Guam over the fact that the influx of alien labor to Guam is controlled from Washington - sometimes in response to national interests rather than Guamanian interests. Japanese hotel builders, it is alleged, have been able to bring in alien labor and put up hotels cheaper than Guamanian competitors, who usually must use Guamanian labor.

In the present governorship race, neither Gov. Carlos Camacho, the Republican incumbent seeking re-election, nor Sen. Ricardo Bordallo, the Democratic nominee, is talking Statehood.

Instead, once the Marianas deal is complete, either winner is likely to sit down and try to negotiate similar terms for Guam.

Puerto Rico, Guam and the Marianas are beginning to see commonwealth status as a way of getting a better deal from the U.S. than they could get with Statehood.

It can mean U.S. citizenship, federal aid and a high degree of internal autonomy, yet the right to set up controls on outside investment and migration that are denied to states under the interstate commerce rules. These special privileges seem more attractive at the moment than the right to vote for President and have voting representatives in Congress.