

Pacific Headaches—

Islands Held in Trust by United States Raise Complex Administrative Problems

By G. H. Irving

On New Year's Day the Navy will reacquire jurisdiction over two islands now operated by the Department of Interior as part of the far-flung Pacific Trust Territory.

Seldom mentioned, and rarely thought of, the Trust Territory nevertheless has a way of constantly cropping up in the news. The far-flung territory is made up of 2,141 islands which are scattered over 3 million square miles of Pacific—an area larger than the United States. About 56,000 persons live on these islands.

Today, the two making news are Saipan and Tinian, islands of bloody World War II memory. A few weeks ago, Eniwetok atoll was on the front pages, as it has been off and on for several years. Bikini is another headline island.

Headache for Us

As a matter of inclination most Americans probably would be quite content to have the United States get out of the islands and drop its commitment to the United Nations to administer them. After all, such commitments cost money and cause headaches. We have enough problems without shouldering more.

But it would appear that we are stuck with our commitment—and with the Trust Territory of the Pacific. Our high commissioner for the Trust Territory, Elbert D. Thomas, says the territory holds an "extremely important place in America's line of interests and defense."

Its importance as a gateway to the Orient was early recognized by Spain, which claimed the islands after Magellan landed at Guam in 1521. (Magellan dubbed the island group "Ladrones"—Spanish for thieves—because of some unfortunate experiences he had there). After Spain waned as a world power, the Germans took over the Ladrones (or Marianas). The United States got them in 1898, and the Japanese

took over most of the others under a League of Nations "mandate" after World War I.

That "mandate" is now a "trust," under which the United States has become a caretaker for the islands and its population on behalf of the United Nations.

Military Bases O.K.

Since the trusteeship is "strategic," the United States has the right to maintain military reservations in the district to help preserve world peace. The military problems of the islands are matters for the Pentagon. But the lives and destinies of the people today are strictly a civil problem.

Under the late Harold Ickes, the Interior Department fought a long, hard and victorious battle to wrest control of the islands from the Navy. According to the "Old Curmudgeon," the Navy's rule over the hapless islanders was "grotesque, inefficient, tyrannical, arbitrary and dictatorial."

President Truman apparently agreed. He gave the islands to Interior. The first reversal to military rule came in the case of Saipan and Tinian, which have obvious military advantages.

No one will comment on the reasons for the change, except to indicate that it has to do with "military security."

Interior's Two Years

Meanwhile, the Interior Department has had almost two years to practice the precepts that Ickes used to preach where most islanders of the Trust Territory are concerned. The goals of trusteeship have been quite well defined by now.

Commissioner Thomas said the first obligation of trusteeship is to promote the welfare of the 56,000 natives under civilian control. It is seeking to achieve this by improving the general "health, educational and economic standards" of the Micronesian natives on the islands.

The big goal, admittedly a distant one, is democratic self-government. Yet self-government is not easily achieved on the complex scale necessary in today's increasingly involved and difficult world, especially to island peoples who have been under a series of foreign flags for some 400 years.

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"We are trying to train native teachers, sanitary practitioners and medical and dental assistants. At the same time, we are attempting to set up community courts to handle the slowly increasing problems of the islands. We have established a number of educational associations and, where possible, created interisland community organizations."

The Interior Department is encouraging the natives to open and operate their own small stores. The natives never before operated any commercial ventures—a fact which obviously complicated matters.

There is no doubt it will be a long time before a self-governing community of the southwestern Pacific will be achieved, since the problems not only are ones universal to underdeveloped regions, but complicated by great distances, varying cultures, languages and religions.

Saipan's Gains

Saipan, which the Navy gets next week, has scored considerable gains under Interior. It has become one of the most productive of the Trust Territory islands, growing sugar, rice, fruits, vegetables and the inevitable copra. Livestock and domestic fowls have been introduced to the island, which also has several small native-operated businesses such as a sawmill, shoemakers, blacksmith and machine shop. Rice, brought to the islands by the Japanese, has been encouraged throughout the territory.

"Through education and community effort," Commissioner Thomas said, "we have come to see that our major goals eventually will be reached."

And despite the fact that trusteeships cost money, induce headaches and sometimes blow up into international problems—it is apparent that the United States cannot, and has no current intention of, withdrawing from the Pacific.

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