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Pacific Trusteeship Problems

Independence granted the first of the year to the United Nations Trust Territory of Western Samoa will focus attention on the United States role in the Pacific territories under United Nations supervision.

Now that New Zealand has terminated its trusteeship over Western Samoa, the United States and Australia remain the only countries administering United Nations Pacific Trust Territories. Australia has stewardship over eastern New Guinea and neighboring islands and the United States has authority over the islands of Micronesia (the Marshalls, the Carolines and all the Marianas except Guam, which is an American possession).

Several problems in Micronesia will become more pressing as time goes on. The pace of economic development has been slow. Exports of copra, the main export product, are below levels reached under pre-war Japanese occupation, and it is not certain that the islanders' living standards are as high as during Japanese rule. The territory is classified as strategic under our United Nations trusteeship agreement, but in this nuclear age its exact strategic importance is doubtful. The United States has only recently shown that it does not wish to push its strategic interests to the point of resuming nuclear testing in the Marshalls.

Division of authority between the Navy Department, which rules the northern Marianas except for Rota, and Interior, which controls the other islands, leads to administrative awkwardness. We are committed in the United Nations trusteeship agreement to self-government or independence for the islands; but it is questionable if independence, at least as a unit, for the 80,000 people of Micronesia living on 2,141 small islands and atolls scattered within three million square miles of Pacific Ocean is a practical proposition.

The Administration should be making fresh efforts to deal with major problems in the Trust Territory in view of the increased United Nations attention that is certain to be given our Pacific stewardship from now on. Our record in the islands has been good, on the whole, particularly in the fields of public health and education, but we could do much more for economic development and in preparing the Micronesians for self-government.