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Opening Remarks by Rear Admiral Leon S. Fiske, Deputy
High Commissioner of the Trust Territory of the
Pacific Isles, before the Trusteeship Council.

Mr. President and Members of the Trusteeship Council:

It is a pleasure for me to meet the members of the Trusteeship Council as the United States Special Representative for the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands and to discuss with you some of the background and problems of the area.

Geographically, the islands present a series of incongruous figures. The total area contained within the perimeter of the islands is approximately the area of the United States -- nearly three million square miles, of which, however, only 687 square miles are land, the rest being the extensive stretches of the Pacific Ocean separating the 96 distinct island groups. Of these 96 island units, 64 are inhabited; most of the rest are too small or lacking in resources to support a permanent population though they may be visited by neighbors from surrounding islands to gather coconuts, to fish, or to catch birds.

The islands constitute the major portion of Micronesia, literally, tiny islands. The name Micronesia distinguishes this area from Malaysia or Indonesia further west, Melanesia (black islands) to the south, and Polynesia (many islands) to the east. These distinctions are based not only on geography, but also on racial, linguistic, and ethnological factors.

The geology of the islands is very interesting. A vast submarine volcanic ridge stretches southward from Japan through the Bonins and Marianas, Yap, Palau and the Southwest Islands to the western edge of New Guinea. A branch from this ridge extends through the Eastern Carolines. The highest peaks emerge from the ocean in the form of islands and island clusters. Along the east side of this ridge there are trenches with depths up to some 30,000 feet. On the west side of this ridge the depths range to 12,000 feet. The islands of the Trust Territory formed by this volcanic ridge are usually referred to as the high islands, as contrasted to the islands of coral which are called the low islands. The Marianas are high islands; the Carolines contain both high and low islands; the Marshalls are all low islands.

The climate and weather of these islands are, in general, tropical and rainy, characterized by small seasonal changes of the various climatic factors. Both the temperature and barometric pressure are remarkably uniform throughout the year. The maximum temperature seldom ranges above 90° or below 70°. The relative humidity will vary from 85% to 75%. This humidity, plus the tropical temperature, combine to provide an area of heavy rainfall. Over 100 inches of rain per year is not uncommon.

The total indigenous population of the Trust Territory is approximately 54,000, primarily located on the seven principal island units of Saipan, Palau, Yap, Truk, Ponape, Kusaie and Majuro. In most of the island groups the people are relatively non-gregarious, and are scattered in small settlements along the coast and to some extent in the interior of the islands, thus making visits from field officers to these individual people an arduous and time-consuming task. It has been difficult to determine the exact population. However, under United States administration, vital statistics are being kept and figures are being revised constantly. The density of the population does not present a serious problem

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at present, except on a few small islands. The shortage of arable land is particularly acute in parts of the Eastern Carolines. For example, Pingelap has 685 people on a land area of a little over two-thirds (.676) of a square mile and Kapingamarangi has 511 people on one-half (.521) square mile. The importance of this problem is intensified by the fact that traditionally and by force of circumstances, the inhabitants are dependent to a great extent for their food upon agricultural products produced locally. This land problem is one that will shortly have to be faced by the administering agency, especially in view of the high survival and birth rate now in existence. Transferring parts of the population to less densely settled areas may well have to be considered in the forthcoming years. Fortunately, Ponape, Truk, the Palaus and Marianas will accommodate tens of thousands of additional inhabitants in a good agricultural environment.

The people of these islands, separated as they are by vast distances and often living in inaccessible areas, have developed a number of local differences in physical characteristics, language and customs. At least eight distinct cultural groups have developed, each with its own language. Several of these contain sub-divisions which differ so widely it is a question whether some of them should not be considered as separate groups. Those eight are the Chamorros in the Northern Marianas, the Palauans, the Yapose, the Trukese, the Ponapians, the Polynesians in Kapingamarangi and Nukunoro, the Kusaians, and the Marshallese. While there is visiting back and forth and several colonies of people from one group exist in areas predominately populated by another, each group tends strongly to preserve its own identity to an extent closely approximating a national continent. These separate groupings must be constantly borne in mind in considering the problems of the Territory. It is not as yet in any sense a cultural or social unit. Physically the average Micronesian is of medium stature 5'4" to 5'5" for the males with brown skin, straight to wavy hair, relatively little face and body hair, and rather high cheek bones. People in the western and central districts (Palaus, Ponape and Truk) tend to have Mongoloid type characteristics. By contrast, those in the Marshalls to the east appear to resemble their Polynesian neighbors with longer and narrower hands and faces and narrower noses and lips. Of these various combinations which characterize the various island groups, there are many examples of intermediate mixtures.

The entire population of the islands are thought by scientists to have descended from canoe-voyaging immigrants who came from the marginal islands in Malaysia, possibly before the Christian era. Some may have made purposeful voyages of exploration, others were probably carried eastward by westerly winds and storms, or by the counter equatorial current which runs eastward throughout southern Micronesia. This Malaysian origin is clearly shown by the racial inheritance, language affiliations and customs. It is also apparent from the useful plants and animals which the voyagers undoubtedly brought with them. The time of these migrations is obscure and even the islanders themselves have no clear knowledge of such migrations in their oral histories. Their myths and legends generally picture the people as originating in the areas they now occupy.

It takes very little imagination to picture the confused scene which existed in these islands upon their occupation by the United States. The conflicting and often diametrically opposed philosophies of the Spanish, the Germans and the Japanese had been imposed on the native life in comparatively rapid succession. With each change of administration came new laws, new restrictions and a different code of administrative principles; these changes and the effects of the War left the native mind confused, without loyalties and certainly without ambition or initiative. It is easy to understand that, with these frequent uprootings of the accepted and the replanting of newer, untried philosophies, skepticism was the order of the day. With the inhabitants in this state of mind, ideas of industry, agriculture, transportation and other sources of income were undeveloped and neglected. The people began to depend on foreign nationals who assumed control of the basic industries, and when the Orientals were repatriated and lifted from the economic scene, it left a vacuum which the inhabitants were not prepared to fill.

The Trust Territory is a land of anomalies and incongruities. Virtually any generalization concerning the peoples and conditions in the area has exceptions. A few people are highly educated. A few have surprising accumulations of wealth. Many have absorbed varying degrees of modern civilization. Predominantly, however, both the social and economic life of most of the inhabitants is organized on a clan lineage, or extended family basis, each such group being largely self-sufficient, living close to nature and free of the complexities introduced by the industrial revolution. Under these conditions, the profit motive which stimulates action under a system of free enterprise, is looked upon with suspicion and disfavor and has little effect.

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