

Editorial—

Natives Breach Edge of National Conscience

The confirmation hearing of Gov. Walter J. Hickel of Alaska as an Interior Secretary-designate has shown the nation something else besides the immediate task of the Interior and Insular Affairs Committee in Washington. It has revealed that the native effort in trying to get the land claims situation resolved has breached the edges of national conscience.

Gov. Hickel, whether he knew it or not, has helped the native people to pose the land question before the nation under searching questions of Sen. Henry M. Jackson and his Senate Interior Committee.

Gov. Hickel's brash statements that he could "undo" what Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall has done and that the land freeze in Alaska was a "negative thing" have proved to be blessings in disguise for the native people and the land situation. If Mr. Hickel had not made those statements, the native land claims matter would, perhaps, have been barely skimmed over at the confirmation hearings. Instead, the committee delved deeply into the land question and in the process helped to reveal the national viewpoint on the problem and that it was being seriously considered by the nation's legislative body.

The manner in which the hearing was conducted might have brought home to Walter Hickel the true weight of the land question from the national standpoint at least. Hickel, considering everything, might have received one of the most intense five-day school of hard knocks relative to problems his high office will have to deal with during his tenure of office. Under this grueling circumstance, Mr. Hickel's pledge to keep the land freeze on in Alaska until the 91st Congress has acted on the problem looks to be his realization of the gravity of the claims question. The hearing might have given him a new vista through which to scan the problem with more profound viewpoints quite different from those he held as Governor of Alaska.

In any case, the Interior Committee's questioning of Gov. Hickel has helped the nation to look a little more closely into the complexities of the land claims question in Alaska and those of the duties of the Interior Department. The hearing also showed us a development that the native effort toward land solution—the urgency of that solution—has breached the edges of national conscience. A strong indication of this was Sen. Jackson's determination that he would work for land legislation during the current session of Congress.