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Editorial

Off On Right Step.....^{III}

The important Marianas District Status Talks got underway Thursday in Saipan—and apparently got off to a flying, friendly start.

The opening session was largely ceremonial in nature, but later on in the afternoon both sides, the United States delegation, and the Northern Marianas delegation got down to serious discussion. Decisions that are being made at that table will affect Guam in many ways, and of course, Guam isn't represented—except through Ambassador Franklin Haydn Williams, and his staff. He has made the point that he represents all Americans at the talks, and that includes the Guamanians.

It won't be easy for the United States and the Marianas to resolve all the myriad problems that face them. The talks on Saipan are expected to last two weeks, and both sides expect to resume the dialogue again next year. In fact, Ambassador Williams made the statement that: "Last year we came to Saipan to begin these negotiations. This year we have come to the Marianas twice to continue the effort. Next year, hopefully, we will return to finish the job." That was the first real indication of any kind of a timetable.

Certainly, it appears that the talks might be conducted in a different atmosphere than the recently concluded Micronesian Status talks were—discussions that lasted only a week. Both delegations seemed to be exuding friendliness and warmth, with no visible evidence of any tensions.

Sen. Edward Pangelinan, chairman of the Marianas Political Status Commission said in his opening remarks that the session's agenda will include four topics, political status, financial support, land and military needs and transition.

Although Ambassador Williams doesn't believe it, one of the major sticklers in the present talks may be Tinian. The United States has taken the position that it would like to acquire all of Tinian, and then lease back about one third of the island to the residents. This doesn't necessarily sit too well with the people of Tinian—or at least some of them.

Another possible problem is representation for the people of the Northern Marianas in Congress. Certainly if they have a close relationship with the U.S. in one form or another, they should have, and deserve to have some representation in the U.S. Congress. Yet, Congressional representation isn't anything that Ambassador Williams can offer, because clearly this has to come from the U.S. Congress itself.

Frankly, we suspect that there are many U.S. Congressmen that would be inclined to look askance at the idea of having a Congressman representing only 12,000 people in an island chain 8,000 miles from Washington. In a national average each Congressman represents about 400,000 people. That could be a key issue, the difference between 400,000, and 12,000. Would the U.S. Congress allow it? Right now it would be a difficult assumption to make, although it is certain that the Ambassador has had discussions with Congressional leaders, and may be aware of their feelings.

This could be possibly resolved by making the representative from the Marianas in a status similar to what Tony Won Pat was, prior to the recent change. Or it may be that they could make him a regular non-voting delegate, as Won Pat is now.

The question of financial support by the U.S. is, of course, a major one, but we don't foresee any real difficulty here—not at least compared to the Micronesian problem. It was pointed out that the situation between the Marianas and Micronesia is different, because the Marianas are seeking to become closer to the U.S., while the Micronesians are seeking more self rule. Obviously, the American side is going to take this factor into consideration, financially.

One thing not brought out in the initial discussions, and not talked about much publicly at all, could have serious repercussions for the talks. More than one Northern Marianas delegate has told us that there is on-going pressure from members of the U.S. Congress on them to "get together" with Guam.

One delegate said that some of the Congressmen that he talked to expressed surprise that the Northern Marianas would even consider a commonwealth venture without Guam. After all, they are part of the same island chain, and have the same original people, and the same cultural ties.

The rationale that two separate American governments could exist separately in a tiny island chain escapes most of the Congressmen. And we're not sure they are being stupid in this either.

Yet, the re-integration of the Marianas wouldn't be at all easy, and we think it will become increasingly difficult in the future. Now, many of the leaders of the Northern Marianas have grown used to making decisions, and being involved with administration. We think that they would find it all but impossible at this stage to abandon that power base, and become only a small part of a larger governmental unit that would contain Guam.

The people of Guam, of course, are going to watch the discussions with wide eyed interest, particularly the part about financial assistance. We don't think this is necessarily jealousy, nor envy, although that may enter into it. Guam just is interested in making sure that our northern cousins don't wind up with a better deal than Guam has—considering the fact that Guam has been a part of the American scene for 75 years. JCM.