

The Pacific

TERRITORIAL IMPERATIVE

reprinted from the book

It last happened more than half a century ago when the United States doled out \$25 million to Denmark and told the American flag over the Virgin Islands. For U.S. is once again on the verge of acquiring a new territory—the Marianas island group, a chain of fourteen volcanic and coral Pacific isles that the U.S. wrested from Japan in some of the bloodiest fighting of World War II. For most Americans, the names of Tinian and Saipan—the largest of the Marianas—are blurred memories at best. But the Mariana Islanders have chosen to join the U.S. in some form of "close and permanent" union to replace the current U.S. trusteeship. A year ago, the two sides

opened negotiations on the question of permanent ties. And last week, work was under way on the final draft of a pact that would, if ratified, make the Marianas, like Puerto Rico, a commonwealth of the United States.

The arrangement is alluring to both sides. Although the Marianas have no economic value—"just sand, coconuts and people with nothing to do," says one student of the area—they occupy a strategic position in the Pacific. The Pentagon is anxious to build a huge air and naval facility on Tinian—near the site of the old runway used by the Enola Gay on its historic A-bomb mission against Hiroshima. The Defense Department envisions a \$300 million base, with a garrison of 2,500 U.S. servicemen and their families, to serve

as a backup for the air base on typhoon-plagued Guam.

For the struggling Mariana Islanders, well aware of the high birth standard of living on neighboring Guam which is American-governed, the prospect of a new invasion by the U.S. military and their dollars is welcome indeed. To sweeten the pot, Washington has tentatively agreed to give the Marianas \$13.5 million annually for seven years plus \$3 million yearly in Federal services—a dowry, in effect, of about \$8,000 for each of the 14,000 islanders.

Even if final agreement on the pact is reached this summer as expected, it appears unlikely that the Marianas will actually become part of the U.S. much before 1980. The United States first has to find a way to end its

trusteeship of the other 2,100 islands of Micronesia—the sprawling Pacific empire it has administered for the United Nations since World War II. And after the plan is voted upon in the islands, it must be approved by Congress and ratified by the U.S. Security Council. At this point, U.S. lawmakers seem disposed to go along. As California Rep. Phillip Burton put it last week: "If they want it and it's in our mutual interest, why not?"

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