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DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

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SECRETARY MORTON ACTS TO AUTHORIZE PLEBISCITE IN THE NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS FOR JUNE 17, 1975

Secretary of the Interior Rogers C. B. Morton today issued a Proclamation calling for a plebiscite to be held on Tuesday, June 17, 1975, in order that the people of the Northern Mariana Islands, presently administered as a part of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, may decide whether they wish to become a Commonwealth of the United States. The islands, including Saipan, Tinian, Rota and others, lie north of the U.S. Territory of Guam.

On February 15, 1975, the Marianas Political Status Commission and the President's Personal Representative, Ambassador Haydn Williams, signed a Covenant to Establish a Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands in Political Union with the United States of America. The Covenant calls for the holding of such a plebiscite. If the Covenant is approved by the people of the Mariana Islands District and subsequently the Congress of the United States, the Northern Mariana Islands would become a U.S. Commonwealth.

In announcing the plebiscite Secretary Morton stated, "The plebiscite will be held in a fair and impartial manner under the supervision of a Plebiscite Commissioner. The President has designated Mr. Erwin D. Canham, to serve in that position as his Personal Representative." Secretary Morton also declared, "Observers from the United Nations and the U.S. Congress will be welcome to witness the plebiscite as well as the Plebiscite Education program, the registration of voters, and other pre-plebiscite activities."

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Commenting on Mr. Canham's appointment, Secretary Morton noted his long and distinguished record of public service including a period as a United States delegate to the United Nations during its formative years, and expressed appreciation for his willingness to accept the present appointment. Mr. Canham was for many years Editor-in-Chief of the Christian Science Monitor and is presently Editor Emeritus. He has participated in the work of commissions concerned with public affairs and holds honorary degrees or citations from several American universities and from the governments of England, France, Greece, Germany and Austria.

Secretary Morton also issued a Secretarial Order that grants the authority and establishes administrative responsibility for the holding of a plebiscite. The action creates the Plebiscite Commissioner position, outlines the responsibilities of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands Administration, establishes a Northern Mariana Islands Plebiscite Advisory Committee, outlines the function of a plebiscite education program, creates a plebiscite voter registration board, establishes voter qualifications, and authorizes a special plebiscite appellate court.

On numerous occasions over more than twenty years the people of the Northern Mariana Islands have sought a close and enduring association with the United States. Secretary Morton's action will provide an opportunity for them to decide, pursuant to their right of self-determination, whether they wish to become a Commonwealth in accordance with the terms of the Covenant. At least 55% of the valid votes cast in the plebiscite must favor Commonwealth Status before the Covenant is presented to the United States Congress for its approval.

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