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MARIANAS: TIME TO DECIDE

Pentagon Planners Hope Islanders Will Opt to Join U.S.

By HAROLD EDITHORPE



Boat on way out of island

WHEN that daring circumnavigator of the world Ferdinand Magellan first sighted a lush string of volcanic islands lying across the Pacific Ocean, he brought them delightfully to our attention. But it was not until 1791 that the first American, Captain James Cook, brought them to our attention. He found a rich and fertile land, but when he returned to the United States, he found that the islands had been discovered by the Spanish.

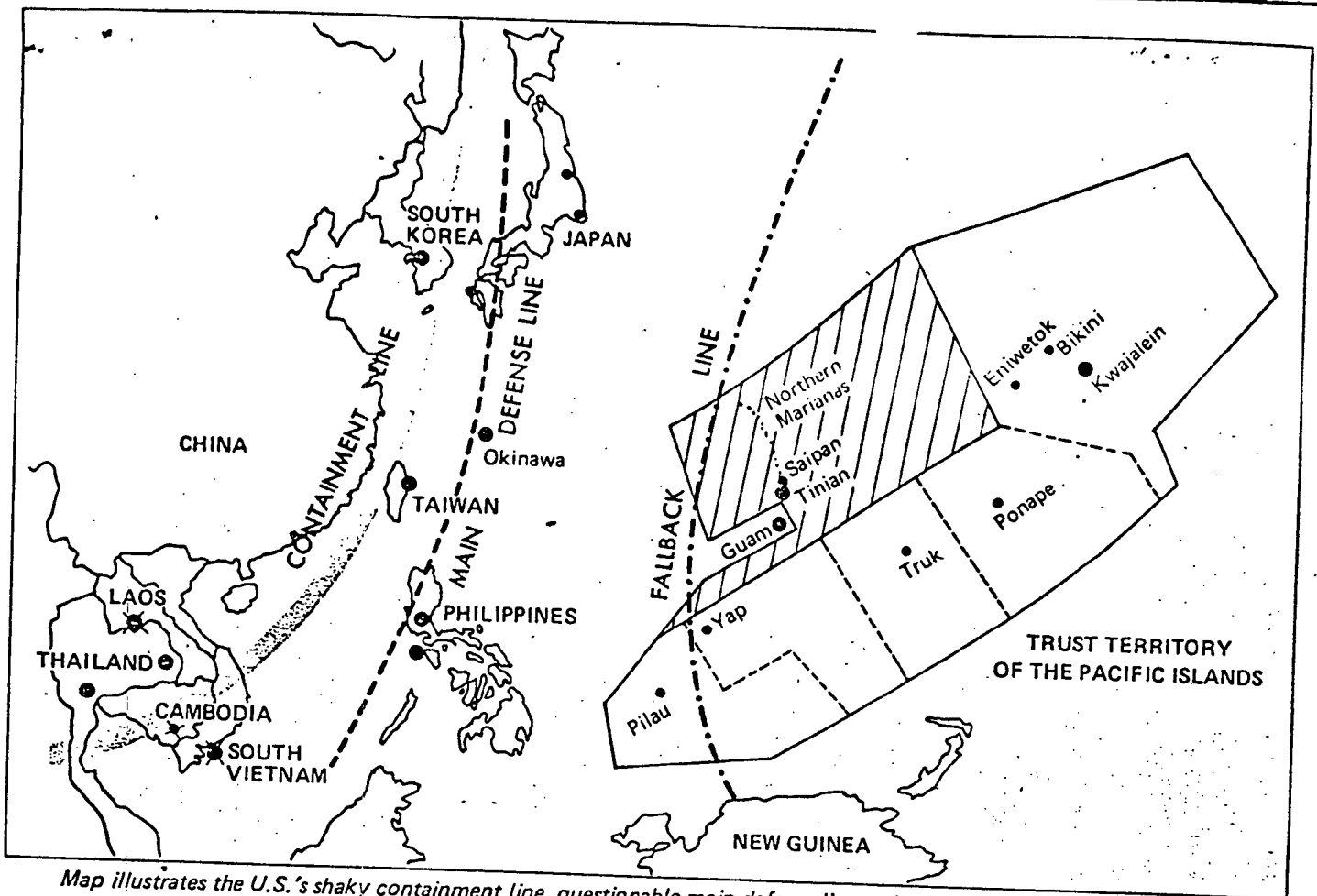
Descendants of those sailors and explorers inhabit the island chain now, to the north, called the Marianas, which are part of the United States. The islands, spanning the western Pacific, are those people who were in a dilemma of whether to remain a part of the United States or to become an independent nation. The possibility has arisen, however, to create the very thing that is the question about who is stealing what from whom.

The islands, called "Guam," are geographically and geographically linked to their brother nation, Guam, a U.S. territory whose inhabitants have many of the benefits of U.S. citizenship. They will soon decide if they want their island partners to acquire American citizenship status. They may, in fact, perhaps inevitably, form a nation of their own, 500 miles away.

Numbering less than 15,000, those people are expected to vote overwhelmingly in favor of commonwealth status. Their reasons are simple. In return for that positive vote, they will get American citizenship, a number of social welfare and development grants under numerous federal programs, and a one-time package of U.S. \$140 million in direct American aid.

The United States, in turn, will get 182 square miles of new territory, an important strategic extension of its defense base in the Western Pacific. Washington must now consider whether it wants to plant its flag along these shores of the Pacific to make its flag what it has had in fact for a generation, an American lake of the Pacific.

During World War II, General Douglas MacArthur, the U.S. Supreme Commander of the Pacific, used these islands as stepping stones to his advance toward Japan's home, as the U.S. forces in Asia were drawn toward the home shores, these were stepping stones once again, and beyond that, in reverse. Pentagon planners in Washington make no secret of their ambitions to build a large air and naval base on the island, one of the U.S. major islands in the 500-mile-long chain of the Marianas, chain. Interestingly,



Map illustrates the U.S.'s shaky containment line, questionable main defense line and possibly permanent fallback line

it was from a World War II airstrip on Tinian, some 1,500 miles east of Japan, that a B-29 bomber carried the first atomic bomb to be dropped on that country.

Faced with withdrawals from key forward operating bases in Asia and the tenuous circumstances surrounding other possible bases, U.S. military strategists have set their sights on Tinian as a potential fallback position in the Pacific. With the already developed base of Guam to the south, Tinian would give declining American power in the Far East a hefty boost.

There is a feeling among those planners that U.S. power must be based on land under firm American control. Bases on foreign soil — such as the Thai air bases, Okinawa marine camps and Taiwan facilities — are, it is felt, too subject to changeable political conditions to offer long-term security.

However, American domestic political considerations also may figure significantly. Not since 1922 has the United States formally absorbed new land into its body politic — although it has upgraded previously-acquired colonies to improved

status either as states or self-governing territories — and the Congress, with its recently-acquired sense of independence, may reject the move.

Possibly illustrative of the prevailing political mood in Washington are sentiments expressed by Senator Gary Hart, a Colorado Democrat who managed the unsuccessful 1972 presidential campaign

U.S. military strategists have set their sights on Tinian as a potential fallback position

of George McGovern.

"It is appalling," Senator Hart recently declared, "that the United States of America should involve itself in this type of archaic policy." He added: "The Pentagon plans to set up a new U.S.-administered government, and then approach Congress for approval."

One problem in the Marianas is that the islands are a significant part of the Trust Territory of the Pacific, a three-million-square-mile hunk of the Pacific Ocean ruled by the United States under a 1947 trusteeship from the United Nations.

By making a separate deal with the United States, the Chamorros are precipitating a piecemeal solution to the larger issue of what should become of all the trust islands.

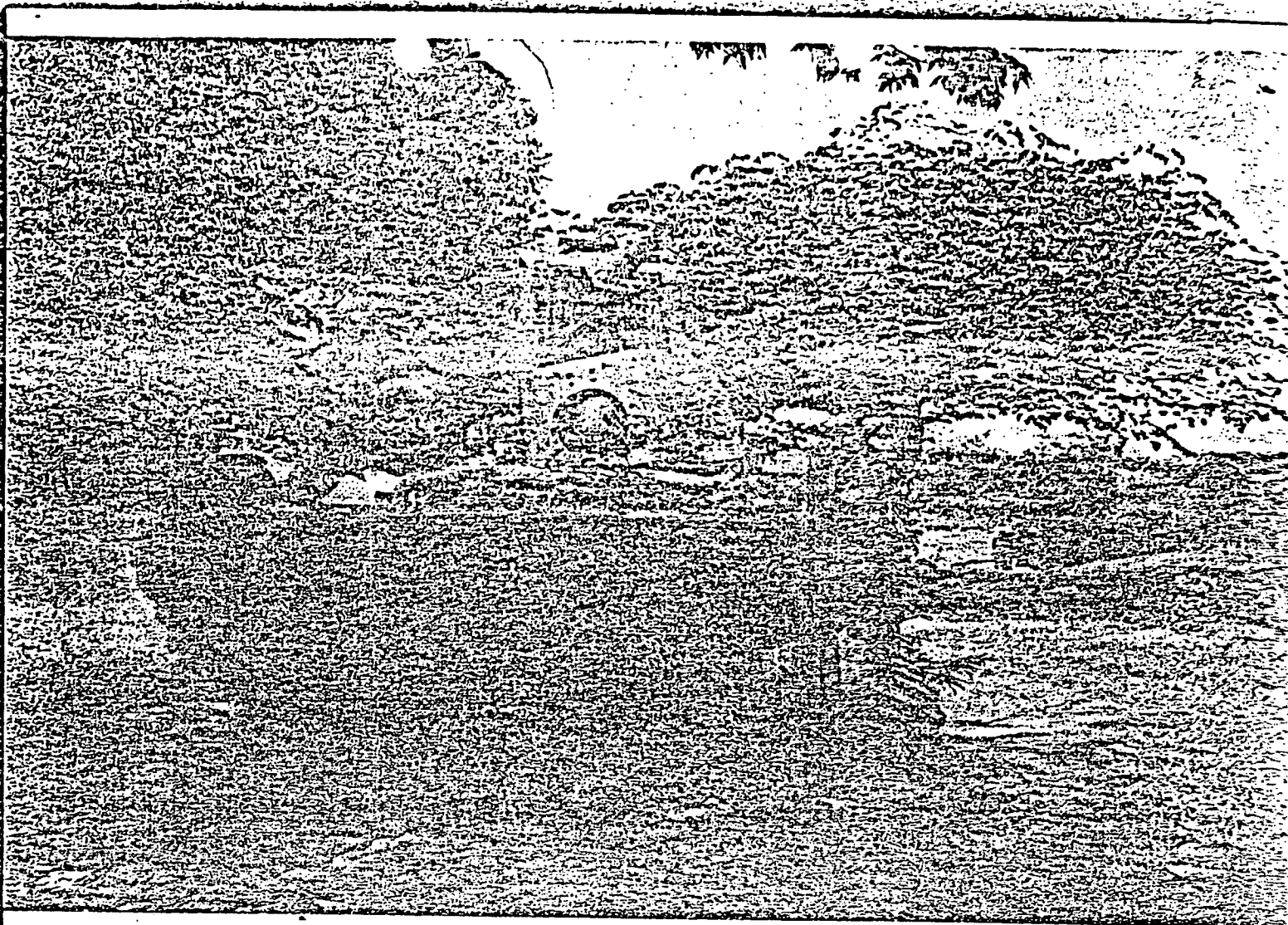
During World War II, the American navy conquered these far-flung island dots, wresting them at considerable cost in casualties from the Japanese, who had taken them over from the Germans in World War I.

Japan had legalized her occupation through a post-World War I trusteeship mandate from the old League of Nations, and the victorious United States subsequently employed identical legal tactics — with United Nations approval — after World War II.

Thus the 2,141 islands of what has become popularly known as Micronesia came under a paternal, if somewhat somnambulant, American administration under a High Commissioner.

The world paid little attention to these islands, except when the United States used the tiny atolls of Bikini and Eni-

Harold Ellithorpe, a longtime resident of Hong Kong, reported for Life magazine



Relic of the Pacific war: ruin of Japanese tank on Saipan island, which was seized by the U.S. at considerable cost

wetok to test a series of atomic and hydrogen bombs in the 1950's. Every three years a United Nations committee tours the territory and produces a report that subsequently is buried with scant notice.

Little wonder. For more than a dozen years travelers were not allowed in the island areas without a "security clearance" from the U.S. Navy. The navy lost control of the islands' administration when that responsibility was transferred to the Department of the Interior, but naval commanders at Hawaii and Guam continue to exercise a firm veto on any plans to develop the islands.

Micronesia embraces six districts from the double chains of the Marshalls in the east to Ponape, Truk, Yap and Palau in the southwest and the North Marianas — which comprise one district — in the northwest. Only 98 of the islands are inhabited steadily and the entire Trust Territory population is only about 115,000.

In the days of the Japanese Mandate, before World War II, the islands burgeoned with activity. Copra was produced along with a substantial fish catch and

other products. In fact, on Saipan the ruins of old Japanese communities, which once housed more than 20,000 plantation workers, can still be seen alongside abandoned Japanese military equipment used in World War II.

Today the entire Trust Territory —

The islands became almost totally dependent on the U.S. Treasury

dubbed by wags the "Rust Territory" for the piles of war junk littering its battle-grounds and beaches — exports only US\$8 million in commodities per year; half of that comes from what is left of its once-thriving copra plantations.

If the Marianas separate from the Trust

Territory, the remaining islands will be left with only 525 square miles of total land area, most of it unusable. Such lack of development can be traced to the fact that, in a weird reading of its trusteeship rules, the United States prohibited all foreigners from doing business in the Trust Territory until last year.

Under American administration the islands became almost totally dependent on financial contributions from the U.S. Treasury. Most workers there are either directly or indirectly employed by the Trust Territory administration, which operates schools, transport systems and other needed infrastructure. There is scant industry.

Some steps have been taken recently to correct this economic imbalance, including a ruling last year that permitted foreigners to invest in island enterprises. Continental-Air Micronesia, a subsidiary of the American-owned Continental Airlines, now flies jets to the larger islands of Truk, Yap, Saipan, and Palau from Hawaii and Guam. New resort hotels for tourists are being built, and tourism now brings in more money than any other

NOT JUST BAT GUANO

THE far-flung islands and atolls of Micronesia seemingly would have little attraction for anyone but off-beat tourists and collectors of bat guano.

But Pentagon strategists in Washington view things differently: they look at their multicolored maps and see not a bunch of sun-drenched islands, but a new permanent U.S. defense perimeter in the western Pacific.

For example, Kwajalein Atoll, in the Marshall Islands District (in which are located the atolls of Eniwetok and Bikini, legendary hydrogen bomb test sites), already houses a top-secret American missile base whose weapons systems presumably are targeted on strategic sites in China and the Soviet Union's Asian frontier.

Similarly, U.S. Marine and Navy authorities are eyeing the little-known but well-situated Babelthuap Island in Palau District. The Marines see in Babelthuap a potential advanced training and staging area (possibly to replace Okinawa), while the Navy envisions its deep harbor as a station for nuclear subs armed with Polaris missiles.

Not very romantic, such plans, but to Pentagon planners they are most necessary.

Economically, only the Chamorros of the North Marianas can be very encouraged by current prospects. Saipan, the main island, is booming as a resort town. Japan Air Lines has rights to fly in now to a beautiful new international airport (due to open this summer) and discharge thousands of fun-hungry tourists into plush new hotels. An American line will get similar privileges later this year.

"The commonwealth change will be the biggest thing that's happened out here in 25 years," chortled one Guam businessman who has commercial interests in Saipan.

During the mid-1960's, when American military power in the Far East seemed firmly ensconced along a forward rim of

bases — South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, Thailand, South Vietnam, Okinawa — these once-strategic Pacific islands were a backwater and had become politically embarrassing.

Demands that Washington move these isles toward independence, as envisioned in the trusteeship terms, were mounting from within the United States and from the islanders themselves. One aspect of the trusteeship, in fact, had been a large educational effort that produced a new generation of leaders anxious to end the islands' anomalous status as World War II orphans.

In a move to give these widely-separated islands some local self-government, Washington allowed each district to elect



License plate on Guam, whose residents enjoy many benefits of U.S. citizenship



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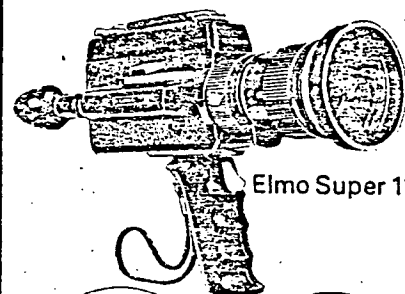
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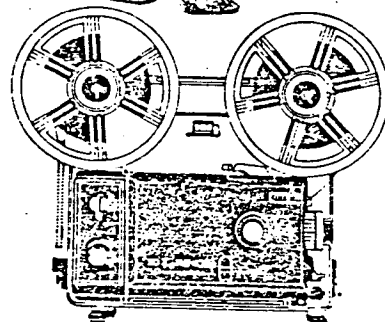
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its own legislature. Self-rule was extended further in 1965 when a central Congress of Micronesia was established.

A Political Status Commission was established and negotiations were undertaken in 1969 to find some suitable solution. The first serious proposal was a vague kind of Micronesian nation, independent but with "free association" with the United States.

Micronesian voters rejected the plan as districts approached the issue in different ways. Some wanted extremely close ties with the United States; some wanted to join the Territory of Guam, already a functioning part of the American political body; some demanded independence, free and clear.

For its part, the United States sought to maintain the Pacific as a territorial extension, keeping tight rein on the region's defense and foreign affairs. Yet, at the same time, Washington wanted to get rid of the aches and pains of direct administration with its annual heavy costs.

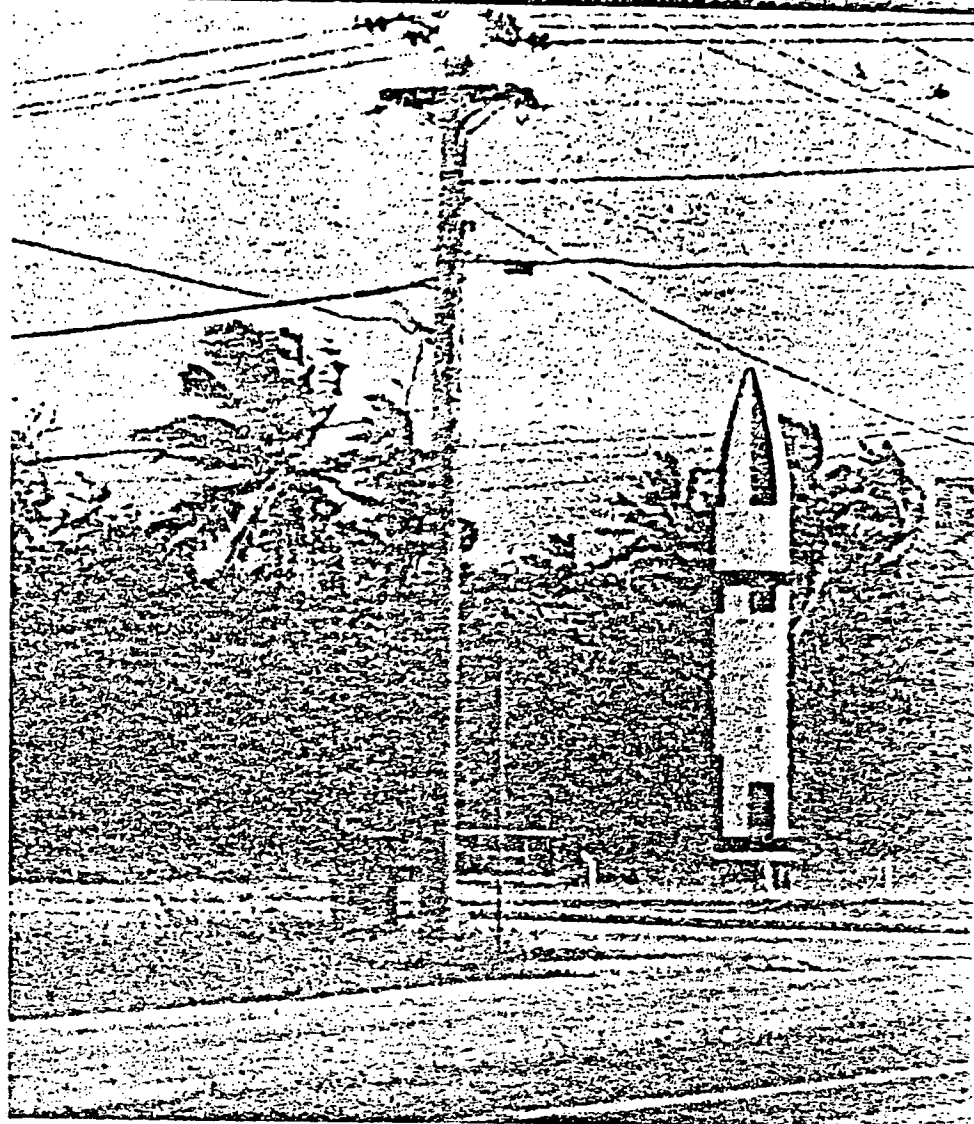
The U.S. sought to maintain the Pacific as a territorial extension

Time dragged on without a clear solution being reached. At a meeting in the spring of 1972, representatives of the Northern Marianas suggested a separate deal with the United States. By that time, as those representatives were well aware, the strategic posture of American power had changed.

The Nixon Doctrine, significantly announced in 1969 at Guam, in the midst of these vital islands, called for a gradual withdrawal of American military might from Asia and the establishment of a "low profile." That meant putting remaining U.S. forces into less visible locations.

As the 1970's wore on, the urgency of establishing new U.S. fallback bases became evident; it also became evident that the Northern Marianas were ideal for the purpose.

Pentagon planners developed plans for a Tinian base that would provide a military infrastructure available for any eventuality. As envisioned, the base, ultimately to be worth somewhere between US\$300 million and \$400 million,



A Polaris missile rising starkly from the ground on Guam is a visible symbol of

would have both naval and air capabilities.

A special ambassador, F. Haydn Williams, was appointed by President Nixon to handle negotiations with the islanders. After more than two years of talking, a deal was struck.

The Northern Marianas would become a self-governing commonwealth of the United States, enjoying citizenship but coming under American foreign policy and defense control. A tidy bonus of US\$140 million would be given to sweeten the pie, most of it earmarked for needed capital improvements.

And, most important, the Pentagon would get its precious Tinian.

The covenant was signed in Saipan, the most strategic of the islands, in February; voters were scheduled to decide on this latest offer this month. If they approve — and they are expected to — the change of status then will require a nod from the U.S. Congress.

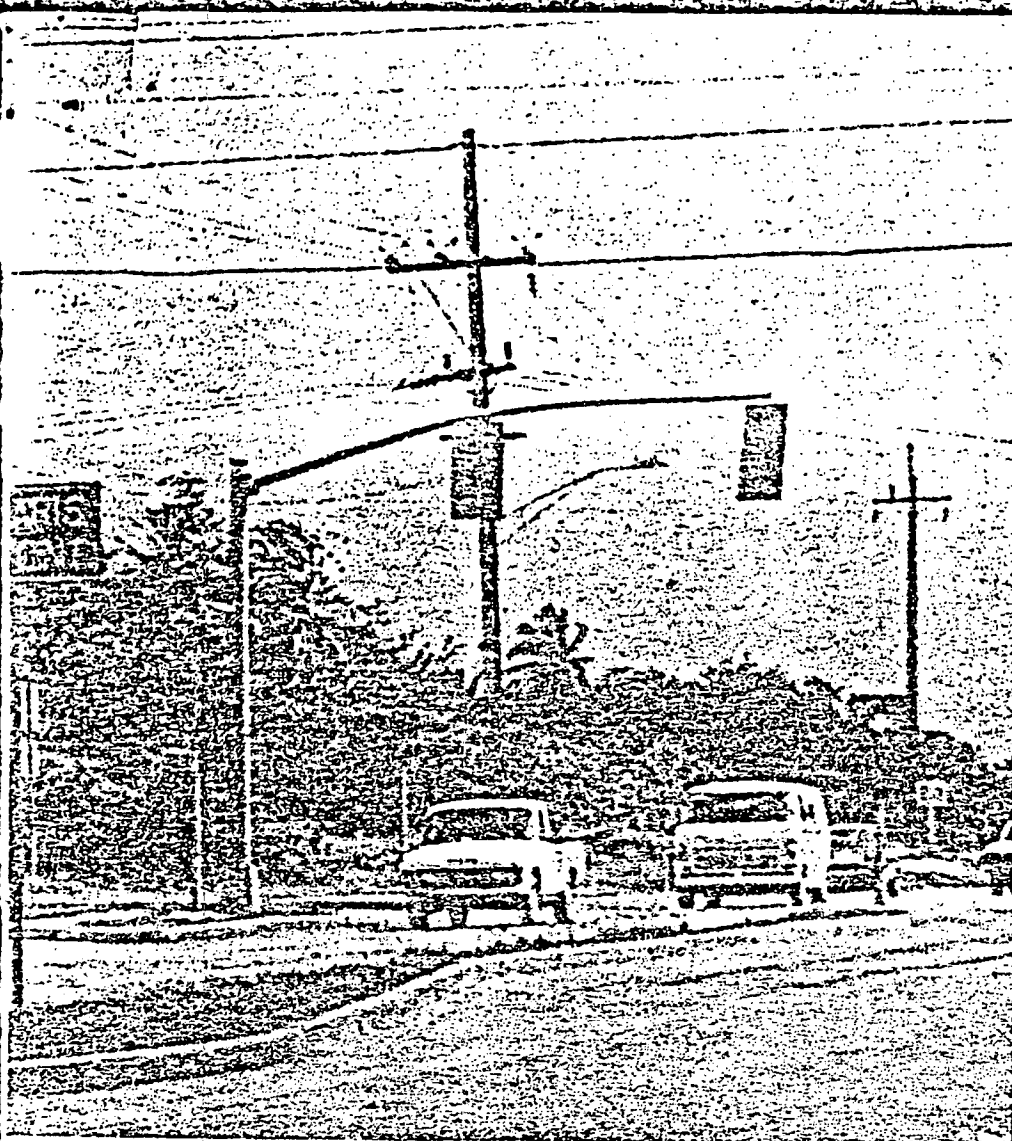
The voters' "yes" will not be unanimous; there is significant dissent on this issue among the islanders. For exam-

ple, Jose P. Mafnas, the Marianas representative on the Congress of Micronesia, has charged that the Marianas Political Status Commission, which handled the negotiations, was illegal.

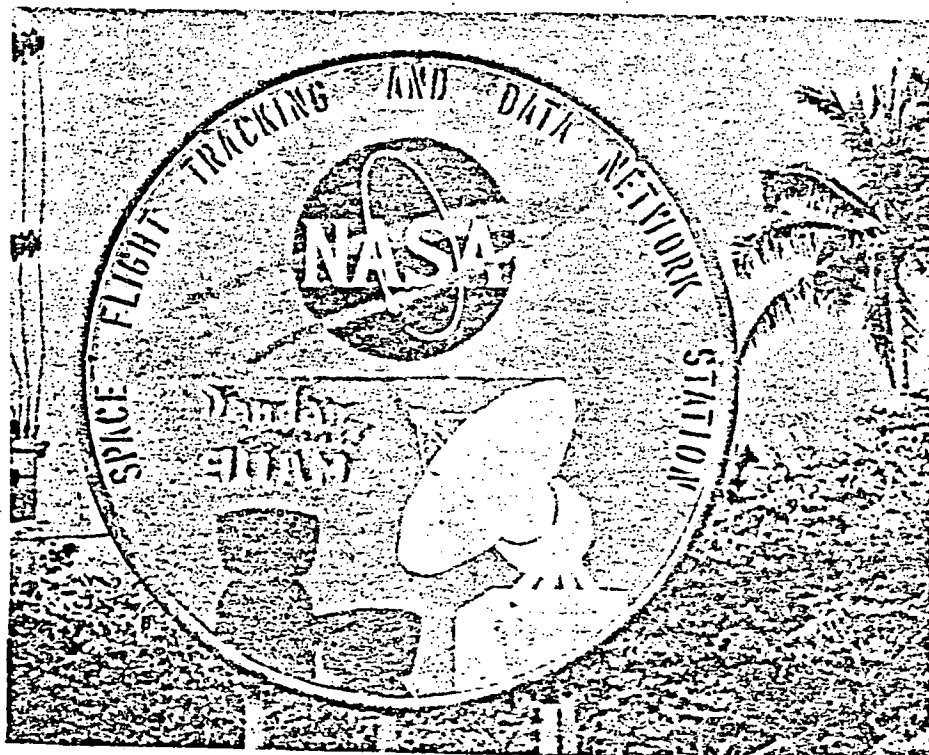
Mafnas, and many fellow members of the Micronesian Congress, maintain that it was illegal for a single district to make a separate deal on its own. They also have been trying in other ways to slow down the pace of this status change, feeling that the Chamorros' rights are being bargained away too quickly and easily.

In fact, Edward Pangelinan, a bright young lawyer who handled the negotiations for the Marianas, has admitted: "We sacrificed our sovereignty for the advantages of joining the American political system."

The advantages of U.S. citizenship include the rights and freedoms of the American Constitution. The new commonwealth will get nonvoting representation in the U.S. House of Representatives, just like Guam. Another important benefit: the islands will continue to receive federal funding for seven years.



American military presence in the western Pacific, which may soon be expanded



A National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) sign on Guam

One major concession was wrested from the Americans: all land acquired by the U.S. government — estimated to be as much as a third of all useful property — is to be eventually returned. By the terms of the covenant, no non-Chamorro may ever acquire land in the North Marianas; even the Tinian base will be legally leased from its holders.

Still, the other five districts of the Trust Territory are unhappy over this possible turn of events. Without the North Marianas, key bargaining leverage is lost, making it more difficult for the other districts to get substantial portions of the American pie. "Can there be six commonwealths of the United States in the West Pacific?" asked one politician rhetorically.

At a recent meeting in Palau, leaders of the five remaining districts talked about "unity." Palau's High Chief Idedul, for example, told his constituents that "not all the plans for the future are known to us in Palau."

He added: "We cannot sell our lives and our birthright," noting that Palau was in danger of losing its "small paradise" because "we do not seem to be making a blueprint."

The current High Commissioner, Edward E. Johnston, would like the remaining districts to produce an acceptable plan for their own collective future. But the likelihood is that the North Marianas' separatist agreement will make a united approach even more difficult.

One Ponape leader, Senator Ambilio Iehsi, has called for a Trust Territory-wide referendum to determine exactly what the people of the islands want to do. "Events have created confusion in the minds of our people," he declared.

A Guam newspaper agreed with Senator Iehsi. "There is confusion in Micronesia," it declared in an editorial. "And there has been no real effort to ascertain what the people really want."

For the tiny population of 1,000 on Tinian, however, the outlook may not be as grand as they think. Although the military will take about a third of the island's land for its new base, the use to be made of that land remains a question.

The mood of the U.S. Congress is decidedly against paying for further bases around the world. The Pentagon already has had to scale down its plans from a fully operational extravaganza to a kind of stand-by shell with minimal personnel. Once it was envisioned that 2,500 sailors and airmen would be stationed on Tinian; now, it seems, the island's base may remain basically empty as a place to be used in emergencies.

A drab future indeed.