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# Marianas Vote To Be American

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**SUSUPE, MARIANA ISLANDS** — The people of the Northern Mariana Islands have voted decisively to become American citizens and to turn this string of Pacific islands into a commonwealth of the United States.

With unofficial returns in a plebiscite nearly complete, 78.5 percent of the 4,650 voters said yes to a proposed covenant to establish a commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands in political union with the United States of America.

The covenant was signed in February by political leaders of the islands and U.S. representatives. It provided that at least 55 percent of the population must approve it.

**THE TURNOUT** was 87 percent and the voting was observed by a United Nations mission because the islands have been administered by the United States since 1948 as part of the U.N. Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands.

The Northern Marianas, which stretch for 500 miles in the Western Pacific, consist of 14 islands. Saipan, the main island on which this capital is situated contains almost 12,000 of the 14,000 people in the string. Other major islands are Rota, in the extreme south, and Tinian, from which the atomic bombings of Japan were launched in 1945.

When the Northern Marianas achieve commonwealth status, which is now held only by Puerto Rico, it will mark the first territorial acquisition by the United States since 1917, when the Virgin Islands were bought

from Denmark, and 1925, when Swains Island was annexed to American Samoa.

**YESTERDAY'S** plebiscite was only the first of several steps for the islands to achieve commonwealth status. The other steps include the approval of the covenant by Congress, presidential approval of a locally drafted constitution and approval by the U.N. Security Council for the dissolution of the trusteeship. U.N. action is not expected until 1980 or 1981.

In the process of becoming a commonwealth, the Marianas will separate from the rest of the Micronesian trust territory, which includes 97 inhabited islands and 2,100 others, spread over an area the size of the continental United States.

Although Guam is part of the Marianas, it did not take part in the plebiscite because it is already a U.S. territory and is outside the trust territory.

**FOR THE** United States, the acquisition of the Northern Marianas means indefinite control over these strategic islands. When new bases built here are combined with those already on Guam, the Marianas will become the United States' forward bastion in the Pacific.

The United States will provide a guaranteed level of direct budget assistance of \$13.5 million a year for seven years and there will be a full range of federal programs available to the Northern Marianas. Residents of the islands will also have to pay U.S. taxes.