

NOW A "PUERTO RICO" IN THE PACIFIC

SAIPAN, Mariana Islands

These sun-drenched islands in the Western Pacific have just handed the U.S. one of its biggest votes of confidence in years.

By more than 3 to 1, residents of the 14 main Mariana Islands agreed on June 17 to associate themselves with America as a commonwealth. Somewhat like Puerto Ricans or Virgin Islanders, they would be entitled to U.S. citizenship, but would pay few federal taxes except those retained here. They would have no vote for the President or in Congress.

The Marianas—and especially the island of Saipan—first became familiar to thousands of American GI's in World War II, when the isles were wrested from the Japanese. The bomber "Enola Gay" took off from Tinian Island, Saipan's neighbor, in 1945 to drop the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan.

If the association is approved as expected by the U.S. Congress later this year, the Marianas would become this country's first major permanent acquisition of territory in a half century.

The islands will be America's westernmost possession, along with nearby Guam, a U.S. territory since 1898 and not part of the association.

U.S. bulwark. The Marianas area is 5,600 miles from the U.S. mainland. Overshadowing the size of the mountainous island chain—which has only 14,000 inhabitants and a land area almost three quarters the size of San Antonio, Tex.—is its strategic importance.

It is 2,000 miles from mainland China and 1,400 miles from Japan, and some day may become one of the nation's most important military outposts.

Tentative plans call for most of Tinian—totaling 27,000 acres—to be converted into a 292-million-dollar air and naval base. The project, according to the Pentagon, would help to secure American defenses near the Asian mainland, especially if U.S. forces are ousted from Okinawa, Japan and the Philippines.

Ambassador Franklin Hayden Williams, who represented the U.S. in negotiations with the Marianas, called the vote a "historic event." He added, "This is one of the few cases, if not the only one, where people were given the opportunity to join the U.S. by the ballot box."

Americanization of the Marianas began after Japan was replaced as the administrator of the six island districts—including the Marianas—of Micronesia.

It is officially called the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, and is run by the U.S. for the United Nations.

Negotiations are still under way regarding the future status of the five remaining districts. Generally, it is expected that the 100,000 Micronesians outside the Marianas will become self-governing internally with foreign relations conducted by the U.S.

Disputes and jealousies among the Micronesians contributed to the Marianas' decision to separate themselves from the rest of the islands.

Also: Saipan's growing tourist economy is helping to spur greater prosperity here than on the other isles.

From the U.S., the Marianas expect political stability and economic progress. Luxury hotels, department stores and traffic jams along this isle's golden beaches link it more closely to American standards—highly visible on next-door Guam—than to the grass huts of some other parts of the Trust Territory.

Most Marianas residents have attended high school and speak English as well as Chamorro, the native language.

The first step in the association plan would be the appointment by the Secretary of Interior of a resident commissioner. He would have powers similar to those of a State Governor. Full imple-

mentation of the merger would occur about 1981 at the same time that the rest of Micronesia attains autonomy.

The cost of transferring the capital of Micronesia, now on Saipan, to another district is estimated at 70 million dollars. The U.S. is expected to provide that money, in addition to 14 million dollars annually for seven years to help the Marianas in their transition.

Secret CIA school. Since World War II, America has spent about 90 millions in the Marianas to provide programs ranging from legal services to a complex that once served as a secret CIA-run school for Nationalist Chinese who were supposed to infiltrate mainland China.

Some islanders are unhappy about the loss of old customs as their youngsters increasingly adopt such American pastimes as basketball and rock music.

The majority, however, appears to be eager to share more fully in the American tradition. Explained Herman Q. Guerrero, who took part in the negotiations with America: "We take pride in becoming U.S. citizens. And you will see that we will not lose our culture. We're strong enough to live in both worlds."

