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The Marianas Covenant

On July 1, 1975, the President transmitted to the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of a proposed Joint Resolution which would provide Congressional approval for the Covenant to establish a Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands in political union with the United States. The House approved the Covenant on July 21 and it is now before the Senate in the form of H.J. Res. 549 and S.J. Res. 107.

The Northern Mariana Islands include 16 islands with a total land area of 183.5 square miles. They spread out in a 338-mile arc extending northward from Guam, which is a part of the same island chain and has been an American possession since 1898. The largest and most populous of the Northern Marianas are Saipan, with a population of 11,091; Tinian, with 714; and Rota with 1,104. The total population of the Northern Marianas is 13,081.

The islands have been administered by the United States since World War II. In 1947, the United States voluntarily placed the Northern Marianas (and other islands which had been part of the League of Nations Mandate to Japan) under a United Nations Strategic Trusteeship which allows the United States to establish naval, military and air bases as necessary to maintain international peace and security. Since 1962, the Northern Marianas have been administered, along with the rest of the Trust Territory, by the Department of the Interior through an appointed High Commissioner headquartered on Saipan.

For more than 20 years, the people of the Marianas, in various referenda and through their elected leaders in the Marianas District Legislature, have expressed in many ways their desire to enter into a permanent political relationship with the United States and to accept the rights and responsibilities of U.S. citizenship under the U.S. Constitution. An underlying reason for the Marianas' desire for close association stems from their ethnic similarity to the original residents of Guam. Close and continuing contact with their blood relatives on Guam has reaffirmed their wish to join their brothers and sisters under the American flag. The persistency of this desire finally led to negotiations which opened on Saipan in December 1972. On the United States side, the negotiations were led by Ambassador F. Haydn Williams, the President's Personal Representative for Micronesian Status Negotiations.

The Marianas were represented by a Political Status Commission, which was so constituted as to be broadly representative of the principal elements of the Marianas, including two of the Marianas' elected representatives to the Congress of Micronesia, two representatives each from the Municipal Councils of Saipan, Tinian and Rota, two from the District Legislature, one from each of the two political parties, one from the minority ethnic groups on Saipan, one representing the business community and one from the less populated, northern-most islands.

During the course of five negotiating sessions agreement was reached on the political relationship between the United States and the Northern Marianas, the framework for Marianas self-government, citizenship and nationality, judicial authority, the future applicability of federal laws, revenue and taxation, U.S. financial support for Commonwealth Government, the acquisition of property to enable the United States to carry out its defense responsibilities, consultation and representation available to the Government of the Northern Marianas in its future relations with the United States and procedures for the approval and implementation of the Covenant. Agreement was eventually reached on the Covenant, which would extend American citizenship to the Northern Marianas population, whom the U.S. has administered for more than three decades. The Covenant also provides for local self-government within the American political system. There will be a locally drafted Constitution which must be submitted to the United States for approval on the basis of its consistency with the Covenant and those provisions of the Constitution, treaties and laws of the United States which will be applicable to the Northern Mariana Islands. The Marianas Constitution will create a republican form of government with separate executive, legislative and judicial branches and will contain a bill of rights. Both the Governor and the Legislature will be elected by the people. The Legislature will have two houses, one of which will contain equal representation for each of the chartered municipalities of the Northern Marianas. A federal district court will be established for the Mariana Islands to hear cases arising under federal law, appeals from local courts and other cases arising under local law to the extent permitted by the Legislature.

In an effort to assist the Government of the Northern Marianas achieve a progressively higher standard of living for its people as a part of the American economic community and to develop the economic resources needed to meet the financial responsibilities of local self-government, the

Covenant provides for specified direct grants. Approval of the Covenant will constitute a commitment and pledge of the full faith and credit of the United States for the payment, as well as an authorization for the appropriation, of direct grant assistance of \$14 million annually, in 1975 constant dollars. These funds will be extended for the first seven full fiscal years after approval by the Federal Government of the Marianas Constitution and would be extended into the future unless changed by the Congress. The annual direct grant will provide \$8.25 million for budgetary support for government operations, of which \$250,000 each year will be used for special education and training in connection with the transition of the Northern Marianas to a new political status. Four million dollars each year will go to capital improvement projects, with \$500,000 earmarked for projects on Tinian and \$500,000 for projects on Rota. An economic development loan fund will receive \$1.75 million annually, of which \$500,000 will be reserved for small loans to farmers and fishermen and to agricultural and marine cooperatives, and of which \$250,000 will be reserved for a special program of low interest housing loans for low income families.

In addition to this specific authorization for appropriations, Article VII authorizes the Government of the Northern Mariana Islands to receive the full range of Federal programs and services available to the territories of the United States, as well as the proceeds of numerous Federal taxes, duties and fees--the same treatment as is presently afforded to the Territory of Guam.

Agreement has been reached on terms under which the United States may lease approximately 18,000 acres of land and adjacent waters in the Northern Marianas for defense purposes. Article VIII Of the Covenant authorizes the appropriation of \$19,520,600 to be paid for a 50 year lease of this land, with the option to renew for an additional 50 years at no additional cost. At present the Department of Defense has no plan to build any military facilities or to station military personnel in the Northern Mariana Islands. The agreed land provisions will allow flexibility for planning in the event that a need for military facilities on Tinian should arise in the future.

The Covenant was signed on February 15, 1975 and it has been overwhelmingly approved in the Northern Mariana Islands. On June 17, 1975, 95% of the registered voters cast their ballots in a United Nations observed plebiscite; and a 78.8% majority supported the Covenant. The document had previously been unanimously approved by the local legislature.

The next step in the approval process is action by the United States Congress. Approval will set into motion a series of steps leading to the creation of a Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. The preliminary steps leading to Commonwealth include administrative separation of the Northern Marianas from the rest of the Trust Territory and the adoption of a locally-drafted and popularly-approved Constitution. Conferral of full Commonwealth status on the islands, and United States citizenship on the Marianas people, will occur after termination of the Trusteeship Agreement for the entire Trust Territory. It is not expected that this action will take place until 1980-1981.