

cause of the new Congressional budget control procedures. The
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Commonwealth Role For Marianas Islands Approved by Senate

By DAVID BINDER

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Feb. 24—The Senate voted today to grant commonwealth status to the northern Mariana Islands, paving the way for the first territorial expansion of the United States since 1925, when Swains Island was annexed to American Samoa.

The Senate vote of 67 to 22 followed approval by the House last July of a covenant to establish a political union between the western Pacific group of 21 islands and the United States, making the Marianas' 14,500 inhabitants American citizens.

The covenant was already approved by a 78.8 percent vote of the eligible citizens of the Marianas in a plebiscite last year.

The Senate vote permits the administrative separation of the northern Marianas from the rest of the Trust Territory of

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Commonwealth Role Voted for Marianas

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 the Pacific Islands, which also comprises the Micronesian groups known as the Caroline Islands and the Marshall Islands.

The other island groups have been debating in the Micronesian Congress for more than a year whether to maintain their present status or to choose some other form of association with the United States.

The Micronesian Congress, representing the 115,000 people of all three island groups, rejected a United States offer of commonwealth status in 1970. Two years later, the Mariana Islands District Legislature empowered a special commission to begin negotiations on separate commonwealth status, leading to the adoption of the covenant.

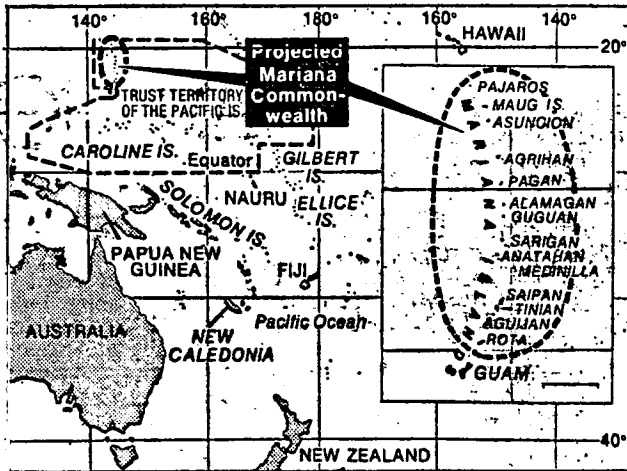
The United States has administered the territory, covering about three million square miles, under a United Nations mandate since 1947.

Other steps to be taken before establishment of the Mariana commonwealth is final are the drafting and approval of a constitution in a constituent assembly and acceptance of the constitution in a referendum. In turn, the United States Government must approve the Mariana constitution and a local government must be elected.

Finally, the entire arrangement must be submitted to the United Nations Security Council, which exercises ultimate authority over amendments or alterations in the status of what has been termed "strategic trusteeships" by the world organization. Micronesia, including the northern Marianas, is the only trusteeship in this category.

It is more or less assumed by the Ford Administration that the Security Council will accept the transformation of the northern Marianas to commonwealth status.

The Senate had been expected to act on the Marianas covenant last fall but the legislation, strongly advocated by the Administration, ran into surprisingly sharp opposition from a small coalition of conserva-



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al Senators. The strongest support for the legislation came from West Coast Senators.

Among the leading opponents were Senators Harry F. Byrd, Independent of Virginia; Claiborne Pell, Democrat of Rhode Island, and John C. Stennis, Democrat of Mississippi.

Together, they mustered 25 votes for an amendment submitted by Mr. Pell and Mr. Byrd, which would have postponed action on the covenant until 1981. The amendment was defeated by 63 votes.

In defending the amendment and opposing the covenant, Senator Pell declared he had "serious doubts" because "we are exchanging temporary responsibility for permanent responsibility." This, he said, could show the United States to be "expansivist."

Senator Byrd said it was his understanding that the northern Marianas had no particular military or strategic value to the United States, the less so with the United States already having sovereignty over the large island of Guam

in the Mariana archipelago.

Adding that the rest of Micronesia would soon follow the Marianas in seeking commonwealth status, he said:

"It is going to create permanent responsibility for three million square miles of territory and there is no way in the world that is going to be beneficial for the United States."

Mr. Byrd also noted the estimated costs of giving commonwealth status to the islands—\$31.9 million for new Coast Guard facilities, \$14 million annually in grant assistance for seven years and \$12 million in Federal expenditures on health, transportation and agriculture programs.

He was rebutted by Senator Charles H. Percy, who had originally been among those raising strong objections against acceptance of the Marianas as a commonwealth.

The Illinois Republican said that after careful study, including consultation with Japanese officials, he had become convinced it was necessary to acquire the Marianas.

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