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Senate Has A Chance To Right History.....

Today should be exciting for Saipan and the Northern Marianas. Saipan is hosting a group of U.S. senators, their wives and key staff people.

This isn't your ordinary group of high-flying tourists.

Frankly, this group of elected officials could make or break the chances of the Marianas people to become part of the United States. That makes it a serious matter, indeed. Right now the Marianas covenant is before the Senate as H.J.R. 549, as amended. Although it was approved by unanimous vote of the Senate Interior Committee on Oct. 3, it has been stalled in the Senate. Certainly the rest of the Senate will want to know what this visiting delegation found out about the Marianas on this journey.

We believe very strongly, on Guam, in having the U.S. flag fly permanently over the Marianas. We would like to welcome our brothers and cousins into the American fold. There is no reason why a group of islands, with related people, speaking the same language and with the same culture shouldn't be together under the same flag--especially when the people have indicated their wishes so strongly.

The people of Guam remember with fear and dread the not-too-distant days when the Northern Marianas were occupied by a foreign military power--Japan. The U.S. then let the Guamanians down, when it was decided that Guam couldn't be fortified, and couldn't be defended against the fierce Japanese attack.

The Marianas was split up at the Treaty of Paris in 1898 when the United States, in one of the most costly mistakes ever, decided that it needed Guam for a coaling stop, but it didn't want or need the rest of the Marianas. This accident of history had a great deal to do with Japan's easy successes in World War II and could have been a key in their participation in the entire war in the Pacific. If the U.S. had kept all the Marianas and had properly fortified them, World War II might have been a completely different ballgame.

You rarely have a second opportunity to change history, but the U.S. senators visiting Saipan have that chance.

During recent hearings in the Senate, Sen. Charles Percy, R-Ill., wondered if accepting the Commonwealth of the Marianas would commit the U.S. to the absolute defense of the area.

Those of us living on Guam, all American citizens, hope to God that the U.S. is already so committed. The Guamanian people were cut loose once before, and we would like to think that it couldn't happen again. The situation is somewhat different since President Truman made the people of Guam U.S. citizens. One of the Mariana Islands, Rota, is a bare 40 miles from Guam. We can see Rota easily on a clear day. Is the Senate going to allow another accident of history and allow these islands to escape again from the United States?

The senators on Saipan should also be aware of continuing and dramatic changes in the world situation, especially regarding the new technologies in mining the sea and seabed. They are certainly aware of the 200-mile economic zone. It follows then that we're not talking about a tiny group of islands with 183.5 square miles of land, but a large block, of strategically located area totaling 154,000 square miles.

Do the people of the Marianas want to become part of the U.S., after living under the Spanish, Germans and Japanese?

Sen. Pedro A. Tenorio puts it this way: "For over 400 years we in the Marianas have, without our consent, been governed by foreigners. We have decided ourselves, and without any undue influence that we wish to become American citizens and to enjoy the rights and to assume the responsibilities of being members of the American political family."

The good senators know that the vote for the covenant was almost 79 percent. The U.S. probably won't get that high an approval rating if the vote was held in Atlanta, or Oshkosh. Yes, the people of the Marianas, who are relatively sophisticated about these things, want to live under the U.S. flag and have indicated that desire for more than 25 years in resolutions and pleas.

During the hearings Sen. Claiborne Pell, D-R.I. expressed the concern of many of his colleagues when he said: "I don't think anybody in their wildest dreams ever thought of these islands becoming part of the body politic." He expressed further dismay that the U.S. would be extending its borders far into the Pacific.

That seems a particularly provincial view in this modern day and age. Distances just aren't that important any more. You can get from Saipan to the nation's capital in about 15 hours, while in the "olden days," when California became a state, it was a trip that took weeks. You also can pick up a phone and call Washington, something you couldn't do when most of our states joined the union. Once Congress admitted Alaska and Hawaii, it accepted the principal that U.S. borders don't necessarily have to be contiguous. In the past the U.S. extended its borders many, many times, first to the Appalachians, then to the Mississippi, and then to the West Coast, as the people asked for annexation and union. We don't see any difference here.

The people of the Marianas won't sit still for a proposed Percy stall until the end of the entire trusteeship. They have often expressed the desire to leave the rest of Micronesia. Just recently, Vicente N. Santos, president of the Marianas District Legislature summed up his feelings about separation from the rest of Micronesia: He said if the United States senate fails to approve the covenant plan now under consideration, the separation would have to occur by an Executive Order.

The U.S. erred by not taking the Marianas in 1898. It erred in not fortifying Guam in the late '30s and early '40s. We took the islands from the Japanese at a considerable loss of American life. We again erred in San Francisco after the war, by not insisting that Marianas were to be a permanent part of the U.S.

The Senators on Saipan today and their colleagues, have a unique opportunity to right the mistakes. The people of the Marianas want it that way. The people of Guam, who may be slightly envious of some of the points scored in the covenant, want the American flag --rather than some alien flag --flying in the north. We want to see our brothers joined with us in a permanent union.

The U.S. undertook the responsibility of allowing the islanders the right to choose their own political future. They have chosen that future, and now to deny them that choice would be heartless. We hope that the visiting senators can see this vital point clearly today.

JCM.