

HAWAII CLIPPING SERVICE
P.O. Box 2033 - Honolulu, Hawaii
PHONE: 734-8124
Victoria Custer Elaine Stroup
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Facts on Marianas

Opponents of the proposed Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas like to pretend that the plan is being sneaked through Congress by the administration without anyone knowing about it. The fact is that the administration kept the Senate and House Interior Committees fully informed about the negotiations that preceded the signing of the compact, which is why the plan won unanimous approval in committee and then breezed through the House. The delay in the Senate stems from opponents in the Foreign Relations and Armed Services Committees, which did not have initial jurisdiction over the proposal.

The New York Times editorial on this page distorts reality by describing the proposal as one "to extend United States sovereignty and citizenship to the Northern Mariana island chain, far across the Pacific." Sure, the Marianas are far from New York, but no farther than nearby Guam, which is already an American territory.

And the statement omits the fact that the Northern Marianas, as part of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, have been under American administration since shortly after World War II and in that sense are not comparable to a part of the Philippines or Honduras or Sierra Leone or Greece — the comparison made later in the editorial.

But the most unfortunate aspect of the Times editorial is the attempt to deprecate the plebiscite on the commonwealth plan conducted last June. That plebiscite was a clear and unmistakable expression of the desire of the people for a permanent link with the United States. Almost everyone eligible was registered to vote, and almost everyone registered did in fact vote — a far greater turnout than American elections enjoy.

In the face of the results — 78 per cent approval of the commonwealth — after nearly three decades of American administration under the United Nations trusteeship, rejection of the commonwealth by Congress would virtually amount to a betrayal of trust.

The United States assumed the trusteeship over these islands because it had to drive the Japanese off them during the war and we did not want to repeat that experience. They continue to have value for the maintenance of American military dominance of the Pacific.

But there is now a moral consideration that may be more important than the strategic. Can we ignore the only act of self-determination these people have ever been permitted?