

The Monitor's view

Heeding the Marianans

An issue of considerable importance both to the United States and to 15,000 people on some remote islands in the Pacific comes up in the Senate this week. Two groups — the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and an armed services subcommittee — will vote on an administration bill to grant the status of an American commonwealth to the Northern Mariana Islands.

Despite the objections of some senators to the legislation, the case for extending U.S. sovereignty to the islands is a strong one. The administration has not gone into this matter lightly, and all Americans ought to be aware of the points at issue:

- It is unreasonable to argue that political union would implant a kind of an anachronistic American neocolonialism in the area. The people of the Marianas themselves want this form of self-government. In a plebiscite last June they voted overwhelmingly (78.8 percent) to become a commonwealth under the American flag, thus rejecting any link with the rest of the Micronesian trust territory of which they are now a part.

Since the United States has a responsibility, under the United Nations trusteeship agreement, to help the people of Micronesia determine their own political future, it cannot in conscience reject the choice of the Marianans simply because it will cost more.

- It is in the U.S. interest that the islands, which are of enormous strategic value, not fall into the hands of another power. A time may come when the U.S. may have to give up or reduce its military facilities in such Pacific places as Japan, Okinawa, and the Philippines. The Marianas, when new bases are built there, together with Guam would become the

U.S. forward bastion in the Pacific.

To fail to tie the Marianas closely with the United States, given the uncertainties of superpower rivalry in Asia and the islanders' own wish for this, could prove shortsighted in the extreme.

- The Congress of Micronesia itself has approved the covenant of commonwealth. Once the future status of the Marianas is decided upon, the other five districts of Micronesia can proceed to determine what kind of relationship, if any, they want with the United States. Failure to act on the Marianas covenant, which has been in the making since 1969, might raise doubts about America's goodwill under the UN trusteeship agreement.

- The concept of "independence" for Micronesia as a whole may sound attractive but it is problematic. This is not a "nation" as commonly conceived but a scattering of more than 2,000 islands with divergent peoples, languages, and cultures. Also, there is no viable economic base for self-government.

It cannot be claimed that the United States, which acquired these far-flung islands from the Japanese in some of the fiercest fighting of World War II, has an admirable record in administering Micronesia. Much can be faulted. But it should be a source of pride to Americans that the Marianans think enough of their postwar protector to want to become an American territory.

The House has already approved the Marianas covenant making this possible and it is to be hoped that affirmative action in the Senate committees will lead to wholehearted approval by the Senate as well.