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JOE L. ALLBRITTON, Publisher

JAMES G. BELLOWS, Editor

SIDNEY EPSTEIN, Managing Editor

EDWIN M. YODER JR., Associate Editor

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Case for the Marianas

A good many Americans may be surprised to hear it, but the fact is that the United States is on the verge of taking on its first territorial acquisition since 1917. A covenant to confer commonwealth status on the northern Mariana Islands is before the Senate for final action in the near future. It is expected to pass over spirited opposition.

The covenant itself is the result of more than two years of negotiations and reflects a long-held ambition of the people of the western Pacific islands for political union with the United States. The area has been administered by the United States since World War II as part of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands under the United Nations. The proposed arrangement would give American citizenship to the 14,000 people of the Marianas, along with local self-government and full constitutional protections. The covenant provides for financial assistance of some \$14 million a year and eligibility for federal programs and services. The United States would assume sovereignty over the 14 islands with a total land area of 183.5 miles extending northward from the American territory of Guam. Leasing arrangements under the covenant would provide for whatever defense installations might be needed now and in the future.

The proposal has already been approved without dissent by the House and by the Senate Foreign Relations and Armed Services Committees. It was unanimously endorsed by the Mari-

anas District Legislature and by a solid majority of 78.8 percent of the islands' voters.

Naturally, however, it has also stirred up considerable opposition in this country, particularly among certain liberal-minded senators. Critics have labeled it as "an anachronistic demonstration of neo-colonialism" which is likely to draw fire from many sectors of the Third World. Others have argued that it is an example of military expansionism at a time when, in their opinion, the United States should be reducing its international obligations. Some have expressed concern that the whole arrangement might be vetoed by a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council when the present trust arrangement comes up for termination, presumably some time after 1980.

In our own view, these objections are outweighed by the emphatically expressed wishes of the people concerned and the potential benefits to the United States. It would mark a significant step in fulfilling our obligations under the U.N. trusteeship agreement to help develop the peoples of the territory toward self-government. It would give important support for the exposed American position on Guam and strengthen the stability of the Western Pacific. And it would provide a much-needed reassertion of the fact that the United States is a Pacific power and intends to remain so. There is, in short, ample reason why the Marianas covenant should be approved by the Senate with the least possible delay.