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Not Another American Colony

THE SENATE is to decide today whether to follow the House and make a "commonwealth" out of the Northern Marianas, a 12-island group of 14,000 souls in the Western Pacific which the United States has administered as a United Nations trust since capturing it from the Japanese in World War II. Unlike too many other obscure international issues, this one has been thoroughly debated. More's the pity, then, that this new venture in well-meaning colonialism may well be approved.

To be sure, the people of the Marianas want in. They voted three to one last year for the commonwealth compact now before the Senate. American sovereignty would be conferred on the islands and a special brand of American citizenship and a special (and handsome) subsidy would be conferred on the islanders. In return, Washington could lease land for military bases if it chose. For the natives it's a good deal. They apparently feel little kinship with the five other districts in the Pacific Micronesia trust territory. They are earnestly putting into practice the United States' own preachments of democracy. They are said to be an engaging people fully deserving the status they seek.

The deal is nonetheless unacceptable. The strategic considerations for annexation are simply unpersuasive. At least Sen. Harry Byrd (Ind.-Va.), no unilateral dis-

armer, finds them unpersuasive. Who needs more? True, the United States has an obligation to the Marianas. But it is an obligation that can best be met by caring for them until they find a better future of their own devising, not an obligation to take them into the family. In this regard, it is crucial that commonwealth would split the Marianas from the five other Micronesia districts which, though diverse, farflung and laggard in their planning ahead, remain the Marianas' natural partners in any future political arrangement. Finally, it is unthinkable, or it should be, for the United States to be adding a colony—granted, a voluntary one—to its territory and polity. That the people, as of now, are pleasant and pliant is not sufficient cause to go that much against the century's grain.

Sen. Byrd and Sen. Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.) suggest postponing a decision until the administration submits a plan for the future status of all parts of the trust territory. That's a better idea. It will be a blow to the Marianas. But the Senate, in weighing the first extension of sovereignty and citizenship in half a century—to a very remote place and people—has got to put American interests first. By asking their colleagues to delay, of course, Mr. Byrd and Mr. Pell take on the burden of assuring fair and expeditious treatment of the administration's large plan once it's produced.

cov in cong senate