

Marianas Facts

To the Editor:

I am writing in response to your Feb. 27 editorial "American Marianas." As the floor manager of the bill which extended commonwealth status to the islands, I feel impelled to correct some of the misconceptions you seem to have of the facts of the situation.

First, the United States has not been extended 3,300 miles further out into the Pacific as a result of the Northern Marianas Commonwealth Covenant. Rather, sovereignty has been extended 44 miles north of Guam, the southern part of the Marianas, already a U.S. territory.

Second, the covenant extended no new welfare or social programs. Under commonwealth status the Northern Marianas will most likely be put on an equal footing with Guam, which now enjoys only about one-tenth of the Federal programs available in the fifty states. I find it interesting that your editorial left vague the question of whether The Times opposes equal treatment for the territories with the states.

Third, I am sure that you are aware of the fact that United Nations General Assembly Resolutions 1514 and 1541 are of a purely advisory nature and should not in any way be confused with international law. Moreover, there are precedents in the cases of Togoland and the Cameroons for

the U.S. position on the Marianas. Finally, I must admit that I am at a loss to understand your assertions that the granting of commonwealth status for a people who voted 79 percent in favor of such status is expansionism (read neo-imperialism), or that the only islands in the world from which atomic attacks were launched lack strategic value.

J. BENNETT JOHNSTON
U.S. Senator from Louisiana
Washington, March 1, 1976

American Marianas

Congress acquiesced this week in the first outright territorial annexation by the United States in a half century. Though many constitutional and legal questions must be resolved before the 14,500 inhabitants of the northern Mariana Islands actually become American citizens, there may be no further occasion for Congressional participation in this dubious political evolution.

In approving the covenant of the Northern Marianas Commonwealth on Tuesday, the Senate at least gave more than the perfunctory rubber-stamp consideration by which the House of Representatives passed the measure last July. Yet the warning signals raised by an ad hoc coalition of liberals and conservatives could not shake the apparent conviction of a large majority that it was natural and desirable to extend permanent United States sovereignty a further 3,300 miles across the Pacific.

The stated justification for this extraordinary move was the alleged military advantage to be gained from securing a fallback base area close to the Asian perimeter—this despite the Pentagon's reluctant acknowledgment that the island chain would be of doubtful military value. Left unanswered were questions of how secure this added strategic exposure could be made, and whether such an expansionist stance really served this country's interest.

Residents of other American territories, such as Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, will now be on firm ground in insisting that they receive equal treatment with the northern Mariana population in terms of welfare and social benefits. This is a potentially costly aspect which the Senate chose to overlook and which may yet cause trouble in the House-Senate conference. Washington faces further challenges in international law when the issue goes to the United Nations Security Council a few years hence; under a U.N. mandate, the United States has exercised trusteeship since 1947 over Micronesia, of which the northern Marianas are a part.

In their eagerness to plant the American flag in the northern Marianas, the Nixon and Ford Administrations have given all too little consideration to the future political status of Micronesia as a whole. Now Congress seems to have relinquished any restraining role in implementation of a policy that promises a wealth of legal and practical problems for the United States—with few if any compensating benefits.