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The Nation

Marianas Become a Commonwealth

President Ford yesterday signed a measure giving self-governing commonwealth status to 21 Marianas islands in the western Pacific, the scene of bitter fighting during World War II.

It is the first new territory the United States has acquired in 51 years. The Marianas had been administered by the United States since World War II as a United Nations trusteeship.

U.S. citizenship will be available to the 14,500 inhabitants, who will formulate their own constitution and government but who will not be able to vote in presidential elections. The United States will retain authority over foreign affairs and defense matters for the islands.

Last June 78.8 percent of the people of the Marianas voted in a plebiscite in favor of commonwealth status, and it was approved by both the House and Senate.