

# Annexation of the Marianas, a 'Dismal Story'

By Jose A. Cabranes

NEW HAVEN—Why, one may wonder, has our Bicentennial Congress approved the Administration's proposal to dismember the far-flung United Nations trust territory of Micronesia and annex one of its districts?

By a vote of 66 to 23, the Senate on Feb. 24 approved a proposed covenant with the people of the northern Mariana Islands, seven months after the measure had sailed through the House by voice vote. We have administered the territory under a United Nations mandate since 1947.

For the islanders, the deal has some advantages. It extends United States sovereignty to the islands under "Commonwealth" status and grants their 14,500 people a kind of United States citizenship, while providing annual payments averaging \$1,000 per person, a onetime annual payment of \$19.5 million to the islands' government and access to some American social welfare programs.

What does the United States obtain from the transaction? Nothing, except a new and permanent territorial stake in the Western Pacific and rights to build bases on the islands without the inconvenience of United Nations oversight.

But the strategic value of the islands has been questioned by a major study at the National War College, and a coalition of liberals and conservatives

—including Senators Gary Hart, Harry F. Byrd Jr., Claiborne Pell, Mike Mansfield and Armed Services Committee chairman John Stennis—has argued that the arrangement expands America's permanent defense commitments in the area while providing bases of marginal or doubtful utility.

The Senate Armed Services Committee was deeply divided on the issue, and only a last-minute change of vote by one member turned back an effort to defer action on the covenant.

Why, then, did Congress approve the first annexation of territory by the United States since 1925 when Swains Island was annexed to American Samoa.

Because there simply are not enough people in this country who know or care enough about these seemingly obscure colonial questions to counteract the shortsighted views of the military Establishment.

Moreover, the expansionists with great effect invoked the nation's commitment to democratic values and the principle of self-determination, noting that United States approval of the covenant would fulfill the expectations of the islanders.

Appeals by anti-expansionists to legitimate American self-interest or to the historic incongruity of the proposal failed to budge a majority that seemed enchanted by the fact that 78.8 percent of the electorate of the Marianas had voted to accept the status of an "unincorporated territory" of the United

States—the quaint constitutional euphemism for a territory governed under virtually unlimited Congressional authority (that is, a colony).

Strom Thurmond summarized the expansionist position when he proclaimed: "It seems to me that if we ever expect to bring in the Marianas, now is the time. This year, this Bicentennial Year, these people want to join us, and I say we should not deny them that opportunity."

The expansionists invariably spoke of the approval of "78 percent of the electorate" in a 1975 plebiscite, and never of the small numbers actually involved (barely 5,000 voters).

The plebiscite reinforced the time-honored national myth that the United States has never been a "colonial" power. It encouraged the belief that United States approval would fulfill the legitimate expectations of a dependent people for "self-determination" and obscured the fact that the fate of the other 100,000 Micronesians has not been settled. For a nation already overburdened by the apparent hostility of the world's darker-skinned peoples, it provided an unusual and welcome display of pro-Americanism by a dependent people.

We may not have heard the end of this dismal story. The Marianas covenant was negotiated with the most compliant group of islands only after negotiators on Micronesia-wide status proved too demanding in pursuit of self-government under a status of free

association. Divide and conquer is an old stratagem and one likely to work against poor and disorganized colonials.

Senator Hiram Fong, a leading expansionist, may have disclosed the Administration's hidden agenda when he noted that approval of the covenant would "give the other people of the trust territory second thoughts about their own political status." He added: "I think we will find there will be increasing interest by the other peoples in the various islands comprising Micronesia for a closer relationship with the United States than the relationship they are now talking about . . . I hope when we approve this covenant that it will be a forerunner of other covenants with other parts of Micronesia."

The prospect of more American "unincorporated territories" across the Pacific—and ever-larger defense commitments in the region—thus unfolds before us. But ultimately, after other legally required United States steps, the United Nations Security Council must approve the plans to alter or end the trusteeship agreement. We can only hope—for America's sake—that colonialism with consent of the governed will prove less acceptable at Tuttle Bay than on Capitol Hill.

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