

March 24, 1976

SIGNING CEREMONY FOR THE NORTHERN MARIANAS  
COVENANT

There will be a signing ceremony in the East Room at 3:00 p. m. today when the President will sign H. J. Resolution 549 "to establish a commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands in Political Union with the United States and for other purposes."

On July 1, 1975, the President transmitted the Northern Marianas Commonwealth Covenant to the United States Congress for its consideration. This action followed approval of the Covenant by the people of the Northern Marianas in a plebiscite held by the United States under United Nations Trusteeship Council observation on June 17, 1975. Of the registered voters, 95 percent participated, and of those who voted, 78.8 percent voted in favor of the Covenant.

The House of Representatives passed H. J. Resolution 549 by unanimous voice on July 21, 1975. Both the Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations Committees, as well as the Interior Committee reported out the resolution following which the full Senate passed H. J. Resolution 549 on February 24 by a vote of 66-23.

Participants: A group of over 200 will attend the ceremony, including the President's Personal Representative to the Micronesian Status Negotiations, Ambassador F. Haydn Williams.

Q's and A's attached.

U. N. Approval of the Marianas Covenant

Q: Will the United Nations approve the Covenant?

A: Most of the provisions of the Covenant are consistent with the Trusteeship Agreement and will be implemented while that agreement is still in effect. The balance -- including those sections of the Covenant extending United States sovereignty to the islands and citizenship to the residents -- will come into effect only after termination of the Trusteeship Agreement. The United States has informed the United Nations Trusteeship Council that it intends to seek termination of the Trusteeship Agreement for the entire Trust Territory simultaneously. We have kept the United Nations fully informed of developments in the Trust Territory. The United Nations Trusteeship Council sent a special mission to observe the plebiscite on the Covenant. We will take up the question of termination of the Trusteeship Agreement with the Security Council at the appropriate time.

Cost of Commonwealth Status

Q: What will Commonwealth status for the Northern Marianas cost the U. S. taxpayer?

A: Very little. The major cost spelled out in the Covenant is an annual grant to the Government of the Northern Mariana Islands in the amount of \$14 million, in constant 1975 dollars. Since the United States now bears the cost of government in these islands, this amount is approximately the same that we would anticipate spending there in any event.

If the United States decides to pick up the option to lease approximately 18,000 acres for defense use, it will make a one-time payment to the Northern Mariana Islands of \$19,520,600 for two consecutive 50 year leases.

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Military Bases in the Northern Marianas

Q: Are there any plans to build a military base in the Northern Marianas?

A: The Covenant gives the United States the option of leasing some 18,000 acres for defense use, but the Department of Defense has no current plans to build a facility on this land.

Micronesia

Q: Is the United States going against the current trend of history in absorbing new territory and responsibilities in the Marianas?

A: In establishing the commonwealth relationship with the Northern Marianas, we are fulfilling our pledge to develop the peoples of the Trust Territory for self-government or independence in accordance with their wishes. The people and leaders of the Northern Marianas have made clear for more than 25 years their desire to become U. S. citizens. The commonwealth relationship will also assure that the islands do not become the object of international rivalry at some later date, and will thus enhance peace and stability in the Pacific.