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Office of the White House Press Secretary

THE WHITE HOUSE

STATEMENT BY THE PRESIDENT

I am signing today an historic document -- H.J. Res. 549, the Joint Resolution of the Congress approving the Northern Mariana Islands Commonwealth Covenant.

It is an important occasion. First, it is a significant step in carrying out our obligations under the United Nations Trusteeship Agreement which has been the basis of the United States' administration of these islands since 1947. Second, it confirms our national commitment to the principle of self-determination by honoring the freely expressed wishes of the peoples of these islands for political union with the United States. And third, the joining together of all of the Marianas under one flag and one common citizenship represents the first major addition to United States territory in the Pacific since 1898.

History will show that this action has been in clear response to the persistent desires of the Marianas people to become permanently associated with the United States -- a desire recorded formally through resolutions, referendums and petitions to the United Nations and to the United States dating as far back as 1950. History will also show that the negotiations leading to the Covenant were conducted in an open and highly democratic fashion, and that the Covenant's provisions are responsive to the wishes of both the people of the Northern Mariana Islands and the Congress of the United States.

Those who were involved in this careful and thorough process are to be congratulated: The Marianas Political Status Commission; Ambassador Haydn Williams and members of the American Delegation; those members of the Congress who worked closely with Ambassador Williams during the negotiations; and those who provided the leadership in moving the joint resolution through its final stages in the House and the Senate. I refer to the members of the Senate and House Interior Committees including Senator J. Bennett Johnston, Senator Paul J. Fannin, Senator Clifford P. Hansen, Chairman James Haley, Congressman Phil Burton, Congressman Joe Skubitz and Congressman William M. Ketchum.

The decision to approve the Covenant was not taken lightly by either the people of the Northern Mariana Islands or by the Congress of the United States. Its provisions and the significance of the islands becoming a part of the United States were subjected to careful scrutiny and weeks and months of debate in the Marianas and in Washington. The plebiscite of last June was conducted in a fair and impartial manner under the able supervision of Mr. Erwin D. Canham, the Plebiscite Commissioner. U.N. observers were also present. The final plebiscite vote, with 95% of those

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eligible to vote casting their ballots, was a resounding 78.8% popular approval of the Covenant. Following months of open hearings the final vote in the House and Senate resulted in equally impressive majorities in favor of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands in Political Union with the United States of America.

Next will come the challenge of planning carefully and well for the new government of the Northern Marianas under its own locally drawn and ratified Constitution. The framers of that Constitution will draw on our 200 years of experience as an independent democracy, and those residents of the Northern Marianas who will one day be citizens of the United States will receive the full protection of our Bill of Rights which protects the rights of all American citizens.

As I sign this Bill, I cannot help but remember that these islands were once the scene of bitter armed conflict. My hope now is that they will contribute to the continuing maintenance of peace and stability and growing cooperation and friendship among all of the peoples and nations of the Western Pacific.

Finally, to the peoples of the Northern Marianas, I extend to you on this historic day my personal greetings and my best wishes as you move progressively closer to your long-sought goal of self-government within the political framework of the American family. Your entrance into union with the United States is warmly welcomed in this our bicentennial year.

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