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U.S. Annexing 2,141 Islands?

By William Steif

The Nixon Administration may try to annex the 2,141 Micronesian islands in the Pacific, which the United States has held under United Nations trusteeship since 1947, to establish military bases and troop training areas to replace those in Okinawa.

The Okinawans last November voted for reunification with Japan, and growing Japanese student unrest now is focusing on demands for return to Japan of the big island in the Ryukyus chain between Japan and Taiwan.

As a result, the Nixon Administration has developed a new "position" on the Pacific trust territory.

Interior Secretary Walter J. Hickel will explore annexation possibilities when he goes to Micronesia Thursday to confer with leaders there on the islands' future.

DISCUSS RETURN

The Nixon Administration sent a high-level representative to Tokyo last winter to open informal negotiations on the return of Okinawa to Japan and has sent at least three separate observers to Micronesia in recent weeks. The latest to return was Marine Lt. Gen. Lewis W. Walt, former commander of Marine forces in Vietnam who is now the corps' assistant commandant.

Gen. Walt surveyed several of the 96 inhabited islands in a six-day visit in search of new training areas for the Marine Corps. He said the people were "warm and receptive" and reported that many areas could be used for training -- particularly amphibious training -- either now or in the post-Vietnam era. He was especially impressed with the possibilities in the Palau group, westernmost of the trust territory.

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2,400 MILES

The islands extend over a 2,400-mile belt of the Pacific and stretch north 1,000 miles from the equator, but cover only 706 square miles of ground, half the size of Rhode Island.

The UN made the United States trustee after American troops wrested the islands from Japan in a series of bloody World War II battles at such places as Saipan, Tinian, Kwajalein and Eniwetok.

The UN designated Micronesia as a "strategic trusteeship" -- the only one in the world. This means the administering power may use the islands for military purposes. The United States exercised that right by testing nuclear weapons at Bikini, building an anti-missile base at Kwajalein, permitting the Central Intelligence Agency to train Chinese Nationals guerillas at Saipan and building several smaller bases at other islands.

Some observers believe a US offer to incorporate Micronesia into the United States would stir a row in the UN, where the United States is on record against colonialism.

FAVOR U.S. TIES

Surveys of Micronesian sentiment in the last couple of years have shown most opinion favoring some sort of tie to the United States.

As long ago as 1966 a US representative to the UN Trusteeship Council said events were "pushing us toward a definite decision within a reasonably short time" on the date and method by which Micronesians would determine their future. Russia at that time was pressing for independence for the islanders.

Former President Johnson two years ago asked Congress to set up a commission to study Micronesia's future status -- and urged a plebiscite before 1972. The Senate last year passed such a bill but the House balked.

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The Micronesian legislature, meantime, created its own status commission and is expected to deliver recommendations to Mr. Hickel this weekend. The legislature was established by order of the Interior Department, not Congress.

When Mr. Hickel became Interior secretary, he gave top priority to bolstering the Micronesian economy, with an eye to more tourism and a bigger fishing industry. The 95,000 Micronesians have a per capita income of less than \$200 a year. He also has been working closely with Defense and State Department officials.

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