

U.S. obtains Marianas —and military bases

By Reuter

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The United States is on the way to making its first major territorial acquisition since 1916, when the Virgin Islands were bought from Denmark.

In negotiations just concluded, substantial agreement was reached on a plan to bring the northern Mariana Islands, in the western Pacific, into a commonwealth relationship with the U.S.

In return for offering the islanders American citizenship, the U.S. will gain important new locations for military facilities.

Physically, the new territory will not amount to much — just 14 tiny islands with a land area of 183 square miles and a population of only 13,381. That population is less than a quarter of the U.S. Virgin Islands, and less than half of American Samoa, now the smallest U.S. territory.

The U.S. entered the talks after more than 12 years of indications that the people of the area wanted a closer and more permanent relationship.

Diplomatic problem

A ticklish diplomatic problem was posed, since the Marianas are an integral part of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands commonly known as Micronesia, which has been administered by the U.S. since 1947 under a United Nations agreement.

Talks aimed at ending the trusteeship also are under way with the other five districts that make up the territory.

The people of the Caroline and Marshall Islands quite clearly do not want to be a permanent part of the American political family, but last year, American Ambassador Franklin Haydn Williams, who represents President Nixon in the talks, bowed to the insistence of the Marianas leaders and agreed to separate negotiations with the Marianas.

Despite mounting criticism of this course, most recently from visiting United Nations mission that toured Micronesia in February, the talks proceeded.

The two sides have now agreed that the Marianas will become a commonwealth similar in status to Puerto Rico, but with some notable differences.

Taking note of fears among the Chamorro natives that outside speculators will buy up their choicest property, the U.S. agreed to local legislation prohibiting sale of land to anyone not of northern Marianas ancestry.

And while American citizenship will be offered, some provision also will be made to accommodate those who might not wish it. This means there

will be two categories, most likely U.S. citizens and U.S. nationals.

The primary interest of the United States in the talks was the acquisition of additional land for military installations. Strategically located some 1,500 miles east of Manila, the same distance south of Tokyo, and less than 2,000 miles from the Chinese mainland, the islands of the Marianas could be increasingly important to the role of the U.S. in the Pacific and Asia.

Need for bases

The U.S. need for strategic bases has been thrown into sharp focus in recent months with the return of Okinawa to Japan, rumblings from the Philippines that U.S. bases may not always be welcome there, and the pullout from Vietnam.

Guam, already an important staging area for U.S. military activities in southeast Asia, is geographically part of the Marianas, but Guam has been a U.S. territory since 1898. During World War II, however, Guam was badly outflanked and indefensible, falling quickly to the Japanese.

During the final negotiations, Ambassador Williams told the Marianas people in a radio address that the U.S. planned to acquire the island of Tinian, 110 miles north of Guam, and use two-thirds of it for a military facility, primarily for the Navy and Air Force.

Tinian's 750 residents were initially apprehensive, but the general feeling now is in favor of a return of the military to boost their subsistence economy.

Tinian was one of the largest U.S. airbases in the Pacific during the last war, and airline passengers flying between Saipan and Guam today still can see the eight runways of the airfields from which the atom bomb raids were launched against the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The U.S. plan calls for construction of the base to begin in 1975, continuing in stages until 1982 at an overall cost of \$144 million. When the base is fully operational, some 2,600 military and civilian personnel will be stationed there.

The U.S. also wants to retain joint use rights of Isley Field, another wartime airbase on Saipan, the provisional capital of the trust territory.

In return for the military presence, the Marianas will get major U.S. economic aid.

The final agreement will have to be approved by the people of the Marianas in a plebiscite, but no one was hazarding a guess as to when such a vote might take place.

The U.S. Congress also will have to approve the arrangement. But the financial aspects of the pact may arouse opposition.

SECRET — CONTINUED

... of the March 1970 visit to South Vietnam of Melvin R. Laird, then defense secretary. Gen. Craig W. Abrams, then Army's commander there reportedly had warned about the threat from the North Vietnamese base areas to the forthcoming American withdrawals.

Striking at the bases was determined to be a "reasonable request" on General Abrams's part, Mr. Friedheim said.

Defense Department comments on the Cambodian bombing followed Monday's testimony of a former Air Force major, Hal M. Knight, who told the Senate Armed Services Committee that there had been deliberate falsification of reports to indicate that strikes had been in South Vietnam, rather than in Cambodia.

The Pentagon contended that "special security procedures" were used, rather than falsification. These procedures were called essential from military and diplomatic standpoints.

The diplomatic facet, it was argued, was that Prince Norodom Sihanouk, then Cambodia's chief of state, had given tacit approval of the bombing but did not want it officially acknowledged.

The idea seemed to spread here that this week's disclosures were the first concerning the secret campaign. Such is not the case. It was discussed at some length May 24 by Elliot L. Richardson at a farewell press conference when he left the defense secretary's post to become the Attorney General.

Earlier that month, it had been revealed that one of the purposes of administration wiretapping in 1969 had been to try to learn how the New York Times discovered and reported B-52 raids over Cambodia in May of that year.

In answer to questions about secrecy in the Indochina war, Mr. Richardson said it would have been better in the beginning to deal with it "in a more open way."

"Of course," he said then, "you know the circumstances under which the bombing of Cambodia was kept secret—I think there were some legitimate considerations in that context, when Sihanouk in effect was anxious not to be put in a position in which he was obliged to admit that he was aware of the bombing." But once the war was out [in March, 1970] that consideration disappeared.

About six weeks after Prince Sihanouk's ouster by Lon Nol, American and South Vietnamese ground forces invaded the North Vietnamese base areas in Cambodia and air operations there stopped being secret.