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Editorial

Fall-Back To Pacific Islands Is Inevitable...

One of the continuing tragedies of the American trusteeship in the Pacific has been the inability of the U.S. military to decide whether or not they need the islands of Micronesia for military bases.

We believe that if the U.S. had made it abundantly clear at the San Francisco United Nations conference that we intended to keep the islands "in perpetuity instead of "in trust," many of our problems would have been resolved. Eventually the islanders would have been given citizenship and would have become part of America.

Unfortunately, while our nation then was strong enough to make such a demand, we didn't do it, thus creating a problem that just isn't going to go away.

Why didn't such leaders as Gen. MacArthur and Adm. Chester Nimitz insist that the islands be a permanent part of the U.S.?

The Japanese aren't so goody-goody about their islands. They insisted that we return the Bonins to them. And we did. The Japanese didn't ask the people of the Bonins if they wanted independence or commonwealth or any other kind of status. They wanted the islands back.

Or take the Russians. They entered the Asian war at the very last minute and with barely a casualty grabbed (for the Communists) half of Korea, and for themselves rich Sakhalin Island in the Kurils. They have yet to ask these islanders if they want independence or free association. When Japan demands the islands back, -- as she did with the U.S.--the Soviets aren't much interested in even discussing the situation. They claim they took the islands as the spoils of war.

Very likely the U.S. military didn't express much interest in Micronesia because it thought the war in the Pacific--and in Asia -- was over for good. The military assumed that China would remain our staunch ally. It assumed that with the occupation of Japan, we would have all the bases we need in the Pacific. The military assumed that the Philippines would forever remain in the U.S. camp and that Hong Kong and Singapore would forever remain in British hands. High military officials assumed that Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam would make ideal bases forever. They assumed that the U.S. would keep Okinawa forever as a permanent threat to the Japanese to insure that Japan never would re-arm again.

A lot of things have changed in those years, including methods of warfare and attitudes toward "colonies." But, equally important, with the loss of Southeast Asia and the emergence of China as a world power, the U.S. now is faced with a "fallback" into the Pacific islands.

The only other alternative is to give up our dominance of the Pacific and admit that the U.S. is not a Pacific power, and that Hawaii is our first line of defense.

The trend is patently established. We have lost Vietnam. To all extents and purposes, we have lost Singapore. We have lost our base position in Taiwan, thanks to our attempt to conciliate with the Chinese. We have lost our effectiveness in Okinawa, in trying to placate the Japanese. Our bases in Japan could be called suspect, as far as using them for any offensive action that wouldn't involve the Japanese. The Japanese are being drawn closer and closer to the Chinese, which makes any base in Japan or Okinawa dubious.

What about the Philippines? Well, as long as President Marcos is in charge, it may be possible for the U.S. to make good use of bases there under some new restrictions and regulations. But Marcos is only one man. What would happen if, God forbid, he was assassinated tomorrow? Who would take over then? What would happen to the U.S. bases?

The fallback, as a strategy, is already under way. It is clearly

visible to all those who look. Unfortunately nobody yet has told the Micronesians, who have been led down a primrose path, with the U.S. leading them to believe that at some future date they are going to have a nice little country all their own.

Still another element has entered this total Pacific picture: an increased need for world minerals and food and increased technology that will allow industrial nations such as the U.S. to develop the oceans. This picture is clouded with international Law of the Sea conferences and 200-mile economic zones. We see U.S. business firms and politicians looking hungrily westward, eyeing the vastness of the Pacific ocean now temporarily under their control.

For the past 30 years the military hasn't been big in Micronesia, although it did establish the Kwajalein tracking station, and retained land in several of the key islands, such as Saipan.

Things are changing. Although the military tries to stay in the background, we see some very obvious signs that the Pentagon has had a definite hand in the status negotiations for the Northern Marianas. Military leaders see Tinian as the first "fallback" base. We don't necessarily see this as bad for the people of the Northern Marianas. They were astute enough to get a pretty good deal out of the whole package, on the basis of future military needs.

We believe that Palau now is the key to military "fallback" thinking. The "superport" concept has just increased the pressures on the military. Nobody--and that includes Japanese and Iranians--is going to pour a billion dollars into Palau without some firm evidence that the U.S. military will be there.

We wouldn't be surprised to see increased demands by the Palauans for separate negotiations. We wouldn't be surprised to see those negotiations based on a military need for the nearly 32,000 acres on Babelthaupt, something that has been discussed in the past. Moreover, we look for the military to seek land in the harbor area and in the Palau airport area for communication, storage, and supplies. We even look for a submarine base to be built in Palau someday as insurance against the base on Guam.

What about the Marianas? Military plans for Tinian include a joint-use airport, a good port, an ammunition storage depot and a Marine amphibious-training site. Tinian would be, as they say, an "interior position" what military strategists call a securely American-held island. Also included in the Marianas deal are 177 acres at Saipan's harbor, and the use of Farallon de Medinilla for a bombing-practice range.

If the Senate approves the covenant--we believe they will approve when the military lobbyists get into action -- the Marianas will be firmly in the U.S. permanent camp. This will have an effect of blocking off the rest of the TT from Japan and leaving the rest of Micronesia hanging off in something of a void.

What about the people of Micronesia? There is no reason they can't have almost complete local autonomy in government while retaining the benefits and protection of the U.S. government.

Three or four years ago, if Micronesia had gotten together and insisted that the U.S. terminate the trusteeship, they may have achieved their goal of self-government. Now with a 200-mile economic zone nearing reality and the U.S. initiating a fallback from Asia, we think that they missed their chance. The U.S. is beginning to realize it needs Micronesia both economically and militarily. JCM.

Voice Of The People