Swan Islands Dispute Is Settled

Honduras Gets Sovereignty, U.S. Keeps Weather Station

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A former CIA bastion in the Caribbean has fallen to the Nixon administration's search for peaceful solutions to international disputes.

The particular dispute involved the United States, Honduras, and two tiny islands called Great Swan and Little Swan that the U.S. has held since the mid-19th century and had used in the early 1960s to transmit calls to the Cuban people to rebel against Fidel Castro.

The American claim to the islands, which lie about 100 miles off Honduras' north coast, had a solid basis: guano, the accumulated droppings of sea fowl.

Under the Guano Act of 1856, U.S. citizens discovering guano on unclaimed islands could apply to Washington for certificates which entitled them to collect the stuff and sell it as fertilizer. Under the same act, the President could also claim the islands as American property, which Secretary of State William Seward did in 1863.

Honduras' claim, first formally advanced in 1923, was based on its role as inheritor of former Spanish colonial properties. But little was heard of the dispute until 1960, when the CIA's clandestine Radio Swan came on the air from Great Swan Island.

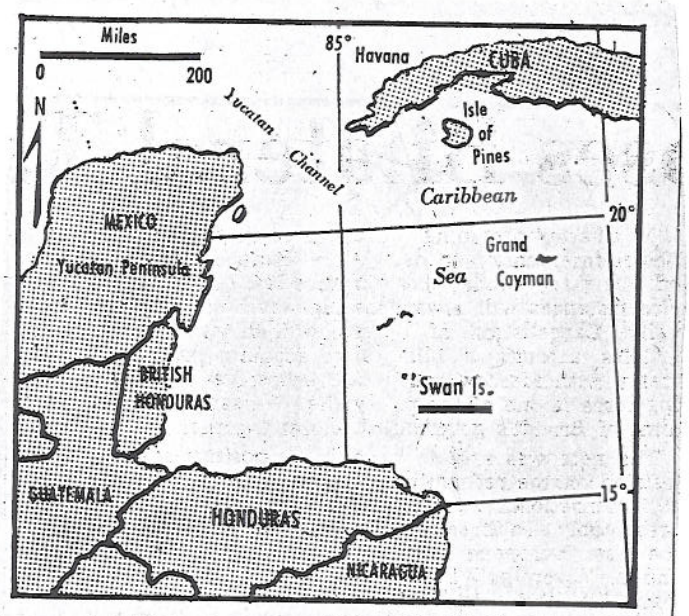
That episode is told in detail in the 1964 book by David Wise and Thomas B. Ross, "The Invisible Government," in a chapter titled "CIA's Guano Paradise."

As Wise and Ross reconstructed it, the CIA used a front called the Gibraltar Steamship Corp. to portray Radio Swan as a "commercial venture" when it began broadcasting programs recorded by Cuban exiles in New York.

Although these first programs mixed entertainment and propaganda, Radio Swan took on a direct military role during the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, broadcasting coded signals to the exiles' landing force.

After the invasion's failure, the station's cover was changed. According to Wise and Ross, the Gibraltar Steamship office was moved from New York to Miami, and this Miami office was turned into something called the Vanguard Service Corp., which continued to run the broadcasts from Great Swan under the new name of Radio Americas.

At some time after 1965, that too was discontinued. There no longer is a CIA transmitter on Great Swan, according to reliable sources. All that is left on the island —which had a population of 28 when a Coast and Geodetic Survey ship conducted a census in 1960 — is a weather bureau sounding station and a radio navigation beacon.



Map by Joseph P. Mastrangelo—The Washington Post

So, when Honduras' Foreign Minister Tiburcio Carias Castillo called on Secretary of State William P. Rogers at the U.S. mission to the United Nations last fall, Rogers made a grand gesture.

He suggested that the United States would move to settle the dispute, which Honduras had taken to the U.N. General Assembly without success in 1960.

The agreement announced by the State Department on Nov. 13, a week before the incomparably larger but essentially similar solution to the Okinawa issue, was simple: the U.S. would give up sovereignty over the Swans to Honduras, and Honduras would allow the U.S. to keep its weather and navigation facilities on Great Swan.