

CIA Bugging Reported In Micronesian Talks

By Bob Woodward
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The Central Intelligence Agency regularly has conducted electronic surveillance against representatives from this country's last colony — the Pacific island group of Micronesia, according to reliable sources.

The electronic surveillance has been used to learn the Micronesian negotiating position in talks with the United States over the future status and perhaps eventual independence for the group of 2200 strategically placed islands in the Marianas, Carolines and Marshalls.

Under a United Nations trusteeship created after World War II, the United States has governed the islands while being formally committed to promoting "self-government and independence."

The CIA and the State Department are locked in a sensitive, behind-the-scenes dispute over the legality and propriety of the surveillance, which is a relatively small CIA operation involving one or two phone taps and room bugs in Micronesia.

President Ford was informed several months ago of both the surveillance and the dispute. He did not resolve it but forwarded the matter to Attorney General Edward Levi for a legal opinion.

The Justice Department acknowledged Saturday that the Attorney General is reviewing a matter concerning Micronesia for the President but said it involves attorney-client privilege and that there would be no public comment. The White House was asked for comment but has provided none. State Department and CIA spokesmen could not be reached for comment.

Justice Department sources revealed that Levi is expected to leave the sensitive question to his successor in the Carter administration although the Justice Department has already done substantial legal research on the question.

Last summer the State Department filed an objection with the White House, arguing that the surveillance is improper, in part because the United States is in effect negotiating with the Micronesians to become U.S. citizens.

CIA surveillance of U.S. citizens is prohibited by the CIA charter. But the CIA has defended the Micronesian surveillance by noting that Micronesians are still foreigners and arguing that it is the proper role of the CIA to gather intelligence abroad.

According to the sources, the CIA apparently wants to continue the surveillance in forthcoming negotiations.

The sources said that U.S. negotiators have received regular reports on the Micronesian position, but they apparently were not informed that the information was coming from electronic surveillance.

Public disclosure of the surveillance, the sources said, could cause an uproar in the United Nations, where the United States has already come under attack for its slowness in relinquishing its trusteeship.

Of 11 such U.N. trustee relationships set up after World War II, Micronesia is the only one that has not become independent from its administrative authority.

From the record it is clear that the United States has been reluctant to relinquish control over the islands.

The Justice Department sources voiced some dismay that President Ford had not as a matter of policy ordered the electronic surveillance halted.

Two Justice Department sources made it clear they were willing to discuss the issue because they objected to the surveillance on moral grounds.

There are some high-level strategic planners in the government who believe Micronesia has significant potential military value in the post-Vietnam period, thus justifying CIA surveillance if it helps the United States maintain control of the islands.

If the United States were at any time forced to withdraw from Japan or The Philippines, Micronesian islands could become the westernmost defense position for U.S. bases.

The only U.S. military base in Micronesia is the missile test site area centered on Kwajalein Atoll. The Pentagon has plans to build two more bases.

Micronesia has a population of about 110,000 people who live on a total about 700 square miles of land, about two-thirds the size of Rhode Island.

However, the islands are spread out over three million square miles, an area the size of the United States.

Since last spring's negotiating session, the Micronesians have taken a harder line and seek full independence from the U.S. soon.

The United States has sought to dissolve the trusteeship more gradually. Under an arrangement advocated by the United States called "free association," the U.S. would continue to run the foreign relations and defense matters for the islands for at least 15 more years.