

Former military adviser says Panama pact needed

If the Panama Canal treaties had been rejected by Congress, a violent outburst by native Panamanians in the Canal Zone would have been a virtual certainty, says a local teacher who has first-hand knowledge of the situation.

Robert Thams, a social studies teacher at Plymouth Canton High School who served as U.S. military coordinator of security for the Canal Zone in the mid-1960s, Thams said feelings run deep among Panamanians in support of the treaties.

"I shudder to think what would happen if the treaties were not passed," Thams said in an interview before the U.S. Senate passed the second canal treaty Tuesday. "It could turn into a very bloody thing over there."

"I have a real feeling for the canal's vulnerability. In my opinion, it would take very little for things to become explosive. It's a touchy, volatile situation."

While he coordinated security services in the Canal Zone, Thams said he grew familiar with Panamanian sentiment after the 1964 and 1966 riots, which resulted in the breaking of diplomatic ties between Panama and the U.S.

"There was no doubt that the riots were directed against U.S. involvement in the Canal Zone. They aroused a lot of feelings and made their martyrs. Things like that tend to be cumulative in effect and the feelings on the part of the Panamanians could get a lot worse this time around."

Thams, 50, also worked on military land requirements along the canal and helped negotiate two canal treaties in 1967 that are strikingly similar to the

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ones currently before Congress.

The '67 treaties involved the establishment of a joint company, the Panama Canal Authority, made up of representatives from both countries that would control the Canal Zone. They returned nearly 85 per cent of the land to the Panamanians with the rest being retained for U.S. military bases.

A third treaty was proposed for U.S. rights to dig a sea level canal 200 miles south of the Panama Canal using nuclear excavation. It was never negotiated because of the Panamanians' opposition towards the use of nuclear devices.

"THE DESIGNATION of areas for canal facilities and military land use is the same for both sets of treaties," Thams said. "The basic difference is the complete turnover that will occur in the year 2000. The '67 treaties envisioned perpetual operation by the canal authority."

Thams said the '67 treaties were signed by American and Panamanian officials but never ratified.

"I don't think the political climate on the part of the American people in 1967 was such that the treaties would have been passed. Certain changes in the last 10 years have brought more people to accept it."

Thams has lived in Plymouth for as long as he can remember (his parents moved here when he was 2 years old). He graduated from Plymouth High in 1944 and worked in the military service for 22 years before retiring in 1967. Panama was his last assignment.

After two years of graduate work at the University of Michigan, Thams began teaching at Plymouth High in 1969.

THAMS STRONGLY favors the new Panama pact. He thinks the presence

of the U.S. in Panama as negotiated in 1903 is simply not compatible with the present relationship between the two countries.

"In 1903, we helped create Panama by supporting their revolution against Colombia. The negotiated treaty took full advantage of an infant country that is now mature."

Thams said he understands the position of the Zonistas—the people who live and were raised in Panama as U.S. citizens—because the Canal Zone is home to them and will be lost. But he figures the U.S. stood to lose a lot more by rejecting the new treaties.

"Eventually, the canal will become obsolete—it already cannot take the supercarriers and the large aircraft carriers. The facility has virtually gone unchanged since it opened in 1913," he said.

"When you're in a situation where you have normal relations, you should be able to work out a reasonable solution. That's what we've done."

Thams also said he thinks the signing of the new treaties will have a positive effect in terms of respect the U.S. will gain from other countries in Latin America.

Thams acknowledged that a good portion of the American public is not in favor of the Panama pact.

"I don't think the public is aware of all the implications. They feel the treaties should not be passed by using shallow arguments like 'we built it so why should we give it away?'"

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Journalists to compete

Public and parochial schools within the Schoolcraft College district have been invited to enter the college's fourth annual high school journalism contest.

Deadline for entries will be 8 p.m. Monday, May 8. Organized and conducted by the college's office of student affairs, the contest honors the best in high school journalism through recognition of newspapers and individual writers.

There are 12 areas of competition including best newspaper. Livonia Stevenson's Spotlight earned top honors in this category out of 18 entries last year. Second place went to North Farmington's Northern Star, and third to Southfield High's Southfield Jay.

Judging is based on a review of three consecutive issues of each entry published during the current academic year.

Panel of judges for this year's contest includes Steve Barnaby, Fred

Delano and Tim Richard of the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers; Jack Hoffman of the Northville Record; Joe Falls, Chuck Thurston and Judy Serrin of the Detroit Free Press; and Cindy Meagher and Barbara Hoover of the Detroit News.

Plaques and honorable mention certificates will be awarded in collective effort areas while cash awards will be given to the top three in individual categories.

An awards luncheon will be held in Schoolcraft's Waterman Campus Center on May 19.

The contest is open to public and parochial high schools in Clarenceville, Farmington, Garden City, Livonia, Northville, Novi, Plymouth-Canton, Redford Township, Southfield, South Lyon, and the Wayne-Westland district.

A brochure with complete contest details is available from the college's student activities office in Livonia.

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