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THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

March 5, 1975

MR. PRESIDENT:

Attached for your information
is Ronald Reagan's latest column.

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THE RONALD REAGAN COLUMN
(For Release In Papers On Friday, March 7, And Thereafter)

By RONALD REAGAN

Copley News Service

Salty tuna boat skippers bellowing in outrage at the seizure of their boats by a small South American navy year after year might seem slightly comic if it weren't a problem that this year will cost the American taxpayers more than \$2 million.

The nearly annual Tuna Boat War has been going on for two decades between U.S. tuna fishermen and the government of Ecuador.

In the early 1950s, Ecuador, Peru and Chile declared their territorial limits to be 200 miles out to sea, rather than the 12 miles recognized by international law.

Those 200 watery miles are the favored feeding grounds for huge schools of tuna during the first three months of the year.

Since the U.S. tuna fleet (based largely in San Diego) descends on the area each year for its lucrative catch, the South American coastal nations no doubt saw in their new 200-mile limit a rich source of revenue. They didn't waste any time proving the point.

With monotonous regularity, the Ecuadorians seize the U.S. boats, impound them in the nearest port and release them only when the fishermen pay hefty fines. They sometimes confiscate the catch, too.

Back when the Tuna Boat War began, the fishermen were instrumental in lobbying a bill through Congress called the Fishermen's Protective Act.

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It provides that the federal government will reimburse the fishermen for their fines and confiscated catches. To date, the cost to the taxpayers has been more than \$50 million.

When the "war" was renewed a few weeks ago, the Ecuadorians, using gunboats on loan from the United States, seized seven tuna boats and their catches.

The Ecuadorians had instituted a system of license fees, but rules out licenses for boats of more than 600 tons. Most U.S. boats exceed 600 tons--not a coincidence. Using their "Catch-22" rules, the Ecuadorians agreed to let the U.S. boats go only after they collected fines and cargoes amounting to more than \$3 million. The State Department will reimburse about 70 per cent of that to the fishermen.

While the U.S. government has chosen all these years not to solve the recurring problem, preferring instead to muddle along with it, there are indications that later this year Uncle Sam will have to decide whether to fish or cut bait over the issue.

Pressure from lobster and salmon fishermen and oil companies is growing to extend our own territorial limits to 200 miles. A bill to do this will be before Congress this year. If it passes, the 200-mile limit might soon become the international rule rather than the exception.

If that is the case, Congress should, for the sake of consistency, rescind the Fishermen's Protective Act and let the tuna fishermen solve their own problem off the shores of South America.

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With the extended limit we might even recoup some of that \$50 million by fining Russian and Japanese trawlers caught fishing in our waters.

If Congress fails to pass the extended limit, however, and the 12-mile limit continues to be the international standard, the U.S. government next winter should send along a destroyer with the tuna boats to cruise, say, 13 miles off the shore of Ecuador in an updated version of Teddy Roosevelt's dictum to "talk softly, but carry a big stick." Ecuadorian aggressiveness might rapidly melt under such circumstances. Taking back those gunboats we loaned them wouldn't hurt, either.

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