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In the Nation

Beleaguered Policy

By ARTHUR KROCK

WASHINGTON, April 9—The violence and anti-American direction of the riots against the Ky military junta government in Vietnam support the official finding that Communists are exploiting the popular unrest to further their design to dominate Southeast Asia. But that is merely the latest exercise of a settled policy. And it does not remove the fact that what is occurring is the ripening of the seeds of civil war that tend to be nourished by the military intervention of a totally alien foreign power, however benevolent and high-minded its purpose.

The threat to the attainment of this purpose by the United States, the totally alien foreign power involved, is stimulated by the Administration's judgment on the highest civilian and military levels that a military junta is the only type of regime which can be entrusted with the government of South Vietnam at this juncture. And the threat was further intensified at Honolulu by President Johnson's dramatic identification of Marshal Ky as the symbol of the American interest.

Reds Quick to Exploit

Whether or not Ky's purge of the most popular member of the junta, and the other personal power-plays which followed, were direct consequences of this Presidential laying on of hands, they at least were productive of the turn to violence by the dissident faction. And, since Ky was the prime target of this dissidence, his certification as the United States' chosen leader was sure to imbue the protest with strong anti-American coloration. That combination presented the Communists with a rare opportunity to exploit both, and naturally they have taken full advantage of it.

Between the time this is written and appears in print, order and some show of unity by the South Vietnamese people toward their government may have been established. But the outbreak of what has been described by some American observers as "a

civil war within a civil war" disclosed an internal condition which challenges the concept that it was and would remain negligible. And on that estimate the intervention policy of the United States was based.

The steady increase in our military involvement has automatically increased the difficulty of modifying the policy, once undertaken. And this painful paradox, accented by the violent and anti-American character of the riots in South Vietnam, has laid on President Johnson the enormous task of trying to extricate the United States from this predicament without the loss of national honor, international prestige or an undeniable bastion against Communist domination of Southeast Asia.

Eisenhower Wary

As Senator Fulbright usefully noted the other day, this predicament developed from a very limited foreign aid program. President Eisenhower transferred it to the new states of Indochina, set up at Geneva, when they gained their independence from France. In holding expansion of the South Vietnam aid program to a small group of military and technical advisers, after the invasion threat from the North became formidable, General Eisenhower was influenced by his professional estimate that greater involvement imposed a strong liability of encountering the condition in South Vietnam that now has come to pass. And for the first few months of President Kennedy's Administration, this policy was maintained.

In May, 1961, the President was still riding herd on the outlines of a South Vietnam assistance program he had assigned to the then Deputy Secretary of Defense, Roswell Gilpatrick. And in a conversation with this correspondent he said he saw no wise alternative to a "neutralist" government in Laos in which Communist representation was most probable. In a similar discussion on October 17, 1961, the President repeated what he had said in a Senate

speech in 1954 that United States troops should never become involved in a war on the Asian mainland. As for the armed conflicts between population groups in South Vietnam, the President remarked that they appeared to be guerrilla warfare; and, if so, this was the type of civil disturbance in which the United States must not become militarily involved.

But the President added he had just left a meeting at which "the Pentagon" generally approved a recommendation by the Chiefs of Staff to dispatch 40,000 troops to South Vietnam, where external military aggression and internal subversion from the north had taken on increasing proportions. He was not, he said, favorably disposed to the recommendation, but was sending General Maxwell Taylor (accompanied by Walt Whitman Rostow of the White House staff) to appraise the proposal on the basis of an on-the-spot investigation. The result was adoption of the recommendation of the Chiefs of Staff, and a military involvement of the United States that has since grown to nearly 300,000 members of the armed forces.

It was not until much later, after Lyndon B. Johnson had succeeded to the Presidency, that this fateful commitment was asserted to have been in discharge of a specific obligation imposed on the United States as a signatory to the Southeast Asia Treaty (SEATO), negotiated by President Eisenhower's Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles. The principal spokesman for this sudden and new interpretation, designed as an answer to the widespread criticism of our mounting military engagement, is Dulles's present successor, Dean Rusk.

Mobile Striking Force

But its wholly expedient nature is established by the flatly opposite understanding on the basis of which the Senate approved the treaty. As stated by Dulles to the Foreign Relations Committee, and emphasized in the committee's explanation to the Senate, SEATO was not in any way a commitment in the area by the United States, collectively or unilaterally, beyond "having mobile striking power and the ability to use that against the sources of aggression if it occurs . . . [and] not to build up a large local force, including, for example, United States ground troops . . . but rely on the deterrent of our mobile striking force."