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FRIDAY

COUP TRY COMICAL

Panamanian Pair Was Ill-Advised

(Editor's Note: William G. Gaudet is a longtime reporter and observer of Latin American affairs. He recently returned from a trip to Panama.)

By WILLIAM G. GAUDET

If it did not have so many tragic implications for the two colonels who outwardly masterminded the attempt to oust Brig. General Omar Torrijos as strong man of Panama, the attempted coup could be listed as one of the most comical events ever attempted in Latin America.

Even the statement by the

two colonels as the reason for the attempted coup must be placed in the humorous column. General Torrijos was charged with the heinous crime of sponsoring a "personality cult."

Fact of the matter is that the two colonels, Ramiro Silvera and Amada Sanjur, in all probability spurred on by smooth talking civilian politicians who were looking for a way of getting some power restored, completely misread the temper of the National Guard and the Panamanian people.

Analysis and Comment

TO REGAIN power, Gen. Torrijos, who was in Mexico City at a race track at the time, had to do was to fly to David in the north of Panama, drive to Panama City and have the two colonels jailed, charged with subversion. The general has yet to say what will or will not happen to the other members of the junta, Colonels Jose M. Pinilla and Bolivar Urrutia, who also participated in the conspiracy. These two colonels had cooperated with Torrijos 14 months ago when they successfully ousted Arnulfo Arias from the presidency. His regime lasted exactly 11 days and was the third time Arnulfo had been president

and the third time he had been ousted from power.

One thing definite about Colonels Pinilla and Urrutia—they no longer will be members of the ruling junta of Panama. All power now is vested in the hands of one man, Torrijos.

The current situation is a very far cry from what prevailed in Panama at the time of the overthrow of Arias. Panama had been rocked by an impeachment attempt against ex-President Robles in the midst of a terribly bitter political campaign. General disenchantment prevailed. Business had come to a standstill and tourism withered away to almost nothing.

CONFIDENCE was not restored overnight but the three-man junta, headed by Torrijos, Pinilla and Urrutia, slowly began a purge of those politicians who for years had been milking the Panama treasury. In the beginning this did produce many charges and counter charges against Torrijos and his associates. Unquestionably, many of the charges against Torrijos were true, but at the time Panama was in need of truly strong medicine if any cure for the many ailments were to result. The University in Panama City was a hot-bed for many plots and conspiracies against Torrijos and for this reason it was closed.

Torrijos also demanded that the Panama daily newspapers refrain from criticizing the government. For this act his regime was bitterly criticized by the Inter-American Press Association. He brought greatest displeasure on his regime when he seized U.S. daily newspapers which were destined for sale in the Canal Zone.

So much pressure was brought on his government that the seizure order was rescinded and the newspapers were allowed to enter the Canal Zone.

Virtually all of this has changed during the last six months and a new confidence has replaced earlier fears of what the junta would do.

Principal reason for this stems from the fact that Torrijos, instead of making promises, has actually started government projects which the masses can see. Heretofore, Colon, Panama's second largest city, had been the forgotten city of Panama. But under Torrijos many new projects aimed at giving the city a true face lifting already have started.

WHEN I WAS in Panama less than 10 days ago, I had the opportunity of talking with foreign bankers, businessmen, and with Panamanians who were not in government. All are of the opinion that Torrijos is doing an excellent job for Panama and not simply trying to line his own pockets with government money.

As a result of this new confidence in the government, new construction has started, new banks have opened, and the Colon Free Zone is currently enjoying one of its finer boom periods. Tourism also has sharply increased and the outlook for 1970 is equally as good.

By far, however, the most important fact to come out of the coup is that barring some incredible incident, no new attempt will be made to oust Torrijos. This means he can continue with his program of trying to develop the economy of Panama. Even though Torrijos is the strong man at the moment, he has stated publicly on numerous occasions that just as soon as is practical, national elections will be held.