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U.S. Reviews Policy On Hemisphere Coups

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United States policy toward military dictatorship and threats of dictatorship in Latin America is undergoing searching re-examination.

This became clear in the aftermath of meetings that took place here this week at which all U.S. chiefs of diplomatic and aid missions in Latin America discussed hemispheric problems with Administration officials.

The policy that appears to have emerged so far does not basically differ from that of the Kennedy Administration. But a subtle change in tactics can be noted.

National Interest

At a news conference on Thursday, a State Department spokesman said "United States devotion to the principles of democracy is a historical fact. United States policy toward unconstitutional governments will, as in the past, be guided by the national interest and the circumstances peculiar to each situation."

Actually, the reports about

a softening policy appear to a softening policy appear to just such vague remarks.

The issue, observers say, is not whether the United States is devoted to the principles of democracy, or whether United States policy is guided by the "national interest" or existing circumstances.

The issue lies in the interpretation of these guidelines. The late President Kennedy revolutionized this interpretation. Most other Presidents viewed it in the national interest to support Latin dictators, not because they liked the tyrants, but because they felt that such men gave the Latin countries political stability and suppressed the Communists.

Policy Relaxed Later

Mr. Kennedy, however, believed that the political stability achieved under dictatorial rule was a temporary illusion that would eventually burst with the buildup of social revolutionary pressures, and possibly produce the very communism that the dictators were supposed to suppress.

At first, Mr. Kennedy applied his anti-dictator policy rigidly, as in the case of the 1962 Peruvian military coup. But as new coups occurred in Guatemala, Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, and Honduras, his policy gradually became more responsive to the particular circumstances involved.

In general, however, the Kennedy Administration was tough on Latin governments that came into power through the use of force. At the same time Mr. Kennedy emphasized in public and in private to militarists that coups would bring immediate and strong U.S. "sanctions" — suspension of diplomatic ties and economic aid.

Gradually, this warning-and-action policy began to yield fruit. Argentine and Peruvian juntas restored constitutional rule, and others promised to hold elections within two years. This policy may also have saved Venezuela from a military takeover.

The Johnson Administration does not want to invalidate Mr. Kennedy's new and daring approach. But President Johnson and Assistant Secretary of State Thomas C. Mann are more conservative tacticians than were Mr. Kennedy and his top advisers on Latin America.

Mr. Johnson and Mann are starting in where the previous Latin policy makers left off in moving toward greater "pragmatism," or diplomatic conservatism, in the handling of coups.

What many observers fear is that they will move much farther in this direction than President Kennedy would have and this fear has been fed by the ambiguity of public statements intended to be "diplomatically professional."

At this point, Johnson Administration would probably support policies not unlike those that Mr. Kennedy might

have favored. If there were a danger of a coup in Venezuela or some other genuinely democratic country, for example, the Administration would almost certainly apply tough sanctions.

But it might not issue advance public warnings to the plotters, nor be very specific in private warnings. Such Kennedy tactics, it apparently feels, would reduce the possibilities of maximum-diplomatic flexibility.

Flexibility Needed

And increased flexibility is needed, Mann is known to believe, so that U.S. diplomats more easily can guide juntas back toward democracy once a coup has occurred, and also in the event a coup might be desirable as a means of heading off Communist threats or overthrowing existing dictatorships.

Critics of this developing tactical concept argue, however, that only strong public and private stands against unconstitutional governments can produce sufficiently powerful deterrents to future coups. They maintain, also, that communism is more likely to gain ground under totalitarian than under democratic conditions.