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Berets' Trial To Blush U.S.

WASHINGTON — The trial of the Green Berets accused of murder in Vietnam seems likely to further embarrass the U.S. government in this most embarrassing of wars. If the American public blushed at revelations that Americans shot prisoners during World War II, consider how it will react to the unraveling of bureaucratic infighting which led to murder by mistake. The fact that Col. Robert Rheault has engaged Edward Bennett Williams, possibly the best-known trial lawyer in the country, to defend him against the Army's charges is proof, if any were needed, that the trial will be both highly publicized and hard fought.

The Army hoped that the Central Intelligence Agency would call a halt to the trial on the grounds of national security. But the agency has taken the view that it has no objection to full disclosure. This can only mean CIA Director Richard Helms is determined to back up his Vietnam station chief, and that the station chief is very angry indeed.

There are two questions about the trial which have not been answered in public. The questions lead to at least a sketchy explanation of what took place.

1—Why did the CIA decide for the first time in recent history to hold a background press briefing to deny that it was involved?

2—Why did Gen. Creighton Abrams, Army commander in Vietnam, find it necessary to take steps leading to a public trial—steps which included solitary confinement of five men including a colonel—before they were even charged?

At first, Abrams was inclined to hush up the affair. But after CIA had blown the whistle, panic set in. The thing seemed too big to stop.

A little history is in order. In late 1963, the Green Berets took over a CIA operation aimed at persuading the Montagnards to deny their hilltop villages to the Viet Cong, who were using them as bases.

CIA had been providing arms to these tribesmen who have no allegiance to either the Viet Cong or the Thieu government, but who, for profit, were willing to keep out the VC.

Actually, the plan did not work out well. With typical Army thoroughness, the Green Berets tried to persuade the Montagnards to go on the offensive—to join the war. In this, the tribesmen had no interest whatever, but they did provide the base for the intelligence operation into Cambodia in which Col. Rheault and his men were engaged when they were suddenly arrested.

When they took over the operation, the Green Berets also took over a CIA agent. They later believed that he had "turned." In the course of their tender handling, he died.

CIA disagreed with the Army assessment of its protege and, more important, with the Army action. From the station chief's standpoint, a brave and loyal agent had been murdered. He was furious. The result of his fury will be an embarrassing public trial unless someone —Army Secretary Stanley Resor, Defense Secretary Melvin Laird, or perhaps the President himself—steps in to halt it.

Bureaucratic struggles between intelligence agencies are not new. During World War II, army G-2 frequently complained about William J. Donovan's OSS.

And during the Cold War, the number of agents tripping over each other's heels in Eastern Europe led to Soviet Premier Khrushchev's famous remark to the late CIA Chief Allen W. Dulles, "Of course we have much in common. We read each other's reports."

But both World War II and the Cold War were popular wars. Ideology confronted ideology, and whatever the mistakes, most Americans thought it important that our side win.

Vietnam is not the same thing. A bungled war, further bungled by bureaucratic rivalry leading to a bungled murder, is not likely to be admired hot-stove reading this winter.