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Topics: When Militarists Dominate Democracies

By WILLIAM L. SHIRER

The government of the French Third Republic in the last decade of its shaky existence, like our own in these years of massive arming and our military involvement in Southeast Asia, faced an age-old problem of democracies. Who determines military policy—the generals or the elected civilian government?

Theoretically, in both countries, the question should not arise. Tradition and the Constitution dictate that the ruling politicians and not the generals have the last word. But in practice it is sometimes otherwise.

In June, 1940, with the Third Republic in peril from the impact of the lightning German advance through France, it was the generals, led by Marshal Pétain and Generalissimo Weygand, who defied the civilian government of Premier Paul Reynaud and insisted on asking for an armistice. It was they who took over the democratic Republic and replaced it with the shabby, authoritarian regime of Vichy.

Happily we do not face such a prospect in this country. But we do face the fact that never before in our history have the generals (and their allies in the defense industries) possessed such power in the nation. It worried even the genial Ike, after long experience as a gen-

eral and a President, and no wonder.

The military have played an increasingly dominant role in getting us bogged down in a disastrous and meaningless war in Vietnam and in putting over the staggering increase in defense expenditures from twelve billion dollars in 1948 to 80 billions this year—an increase of nearly 700 per cent—while our cities have rotted and the needs of the poor and the young and the old and the black have been neglected for lack of funds.

This is not just the view of an ordinary citizen. Gen. David N. Shoup, former Commandant of the Marine Corps, found the military brass "dominant in government." As a result, he feels, "America has become a militaristic and aggressive nation," seeking military solutions of essentially political problems abroad—a revealing utterance from a combat American general, the hero of the Battle of Tarawa.

Pentagon's Appetite

It raises the old question of who is in charge of the store in a Republic. And one is not comforted by the revelation of Congressman Jonathan B. Bingham in the current Foreign Affairs that pressures from within the Pentagon for increased expenditures are still enormous and that "those civilians in

government who are supposed to see to it that the military's appetite is restrained are not capable of performing that function."

If not they, who then is capable?

Recently the President appointed a blue-ribbon panel to serve as a watchdog over the Pentagon. But, according to Senator William Proxmire, eight of its members have interests of more than a billion dollars in defense-related industries. "A sham," he calls it, "and an indication that the Pentagon has become so powerful that it is able to control those who would criticize it."

So powerful as to control the Government itself? And disregard the Congress, as Senator J. W. Fulbright charges in relation not only to Vietnam but to Laos, where, he asserts on the basis of the current closed hearings, the United States is engaged in a clandestine war without the knowledge or authority of Congress.

The French of the Third Republic grappled with these problems and we have their testimony about the difficulties. It reveals, for one thing, that successive heads of government were simply too timid to keep a close watch on how the High Command was spending its money. When an obstreper-

ous lieutenant colonel named Charles de Gaulle once reproached Léon Blum for this, the Premier, a bit nettled, replied that after all military spending was the responsibility of the Army.

"No doubt," de Gaulle replied. "But national defense is the responsibility of the Government."

Governing Generals

The postwar French Parliamentary Investigating Committee, after five years of hearings and weighing testimony, criticized the tendency of Parliament and Government "to relegate preparation of national defense solely to the military." It concluded: "There are very important aspects of war which escape, and will always escape, the soldier . . . A government must never shelter behind the military, but, on the contrary, imprint on it the essential impulsions."

Was that not what Senator Eugene J. McCarthy had in mind when he said last year—to the puzzlement of many—"If elected, I shall go to the Pentagon."

Mr. Shirer, author of "The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich," wrote the newly published, "The Collapse of the Third Republic—an Inquiry Into the Fall of France in 1940."