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In The Nation

The Intra-Administration War in Vietnam

By ARTHUR KROCK

WASHINGTON, Oct. 2—The Central Intelligence Agency is getting a very bad press in dispatches from Vietnam to American newspapers and in articles originating in Washington. Like the Supreme Court when under fire, the C.I.A. cannot defend itself in public retorts to criticisms of its activities as they occur. But, unlike the Supreme Court, the C.I.A. has no open record of its activities on which the public can base a judgment of the validity of the criticisms. Also, the agency is precluded from using the indirect defensive tactic which is constantly employed by all other Government units under critical fire.

This tactic is to give information to the press, under a seal of confidence, that challenges or refutes the critics. But the C.I.A. cannot father such inspired articles, because to do so would require some disclosure of its activities. And not only does the effectiveness of the agency depend on the secrecy of its operations. Every President since the C.I.A. was created has protected this secrecy from claimants—Congress or the public through the press, for examples—of the right to share any part of it.

With High Frequency

This Presidential policy has not, however, always restrained other executive units from going confidentially to the press with attacks on C.I.A. operations in their common field of responsibility. And usually it has been possible to deduce these operational details from the nature of the attacks. But the peak of the practice has recently been reached in Vietnam and in Washington. This is revealed almost every day now in dispatches from reporters—in close touch with intra-Administration critics of the C.I.A.—with excellent reputations for reliability.

One reporter in this category is Richard Starnes of the Scripps-Howard newspapers. Today, under a Saigon dateline, he related that, "according to a high United States source here, twice the C.I.A. flatly refused to carry out instructions from Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge . . . [and] in one instance frustrated a plan of action Mr. Lodge brought from Washington because the agency disagreed with it." Among the views attributed to United States officials on the scene, including one described as a "very high American official . . . who has spent much of his life in the service of democracy . . . are the following:

The C.I.A.'s growth was "likened to a malignancy" which the "very high official was not sure even the White House could control . . . any longer." "If the United States ever experiences [an attempt at a coup to overthrow the Government] it will come from the C.I.A. and not the Pentagon." The agency "represents a tremendous power and total unaccountability to anyone."

Disorderly Government

Whatever else these passages disclose, they most certainly establish that representatives of other Executive branches have expanded their war against the C.I.A. from the inner government councils to the American people via the press. And published simultaneously are details of the agency's operations in Vietnam that can come only from the same critical official sources. This is disorderly government. And the longer the President tolerates it—the period already is considerable—the greater will grow its potentials of hampering the real war against the Vietcong and the impression of a very indecisive Administration in Washington.

The C.I.A. may be guilty as charged. Since it cannot, or at any rate will not, openly defend its record in Vietnam, or defend it by the same confidential press "briefings" employed by its critics, the public is not in a position to judge. Nor is this department, which sought and failed to get even the outlines of the agency's case in rebuttal. But Mr. Kennedy will have to make a judgment if the spectacle of war within the Executive branch is to be ended and the effective functioning of the C.I.A. preserved. And when he makes this judgment, hopefully he also will make it public, as well as the appraisal of fault on which it is based.

Doubtless recommendations as to what his judgment should be were made to him today by Secretary of Defense McNamara and General Taylor on their return from their fact-finding expedition into the embattled official jungle in Saigon.