

# Congo Farce May Be Tragedy

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Funny as the political and military shenanigans are that are now ripping the Congo asunder, they may be sketching a grim future for the United States.

This former Belgium colony has spawned some of the most outrageously ludicrous tales and legends of any new nation; its politics are astounding; its army is laughable. Yet, beneath the surface chaos, lies the danger of exploitation of this chaos, which may already be vaulting America into another military commitment.

It is easy enough to view the Congo as a surrealistic parody of politics. Its army, for example, must surely rank as the New York Mets of the military world. During leftist rebellions in Kivu and Kwilu provinces, the Congolese army repeatedly moved its motorized troops by driving in reverse; so at the first sign of any opposition the army might better retreat.

## *Troops Undisciplined*

The United Nations forces found they had to place the Congolese troops between UN men as they marched down roads (the army refuses to march through jungles, forests, or any unmarked thoroughway). If the troops are left in front, they will pillage any town they enter. If they are left unguarded in the rear, they will run away.

Politically, the situation is Congo-Normal; utterly ridiculous. Moïse Tshombe, the arch-foe of the United Nations and United States when he led mineral-rich Katanga province in a futile secession attempt before fleeing the country, is now head of the entire Congo. He was invited to take the reins of power by Col. Joseph Mobutu and President Kasavubu, his former foes. The United States is now in the position of lending full aid and encouragement to a man they once refused to let enter the United States.

## *Witch Doctors and College Yells*

Moreover, Tshombe, who used white mercenaries to fight Congolese troops in his secession battle, is now using these white troops against black rebels who have organized a "people's republic" out of Stanleyville. These fighters report fantastic incidents such as witch doctors on each side putting rival spells on opposing troops, rebels chanting "Go, Mulele, Go" college-yell style as they go into battle, and army regulars fleeing at the sounds of enemy action, even in training camps.

This phantasmagoria is not the end of the story. From tiny Burundi, which borders the Congo on the east, rebel troops have been getting overt guerilla training from the Red Chinese embassy. This training has been accompanied by clandestine arms aid to the rebels.

Until this Chinese aid became known late this summer, communism had been the least volatile problem in the turbulent Congo. Soviet efforts flopped miserably after independence in 1960, and in short order the Russian embassy staff was kicked out of the country. Now, subversion from the less diplomatic, more revolutionary Chinese has sparked rebel activity, and—significantly—has brought about the vague stirrings of active United States participation.

## ***U.S. Limits Help***

Currently the United States military mission in the Congo is of a distinctly limited, non-combat variety. American pilots are shipping foodstuffs, and other goods to Congolese outposts. However, the planes are also carrying guns and combat troops to airfields around the country; and it is this aid that could prove the key point in determining further U.S. involvement.

It should be remembered that United States activity in Viet Nam was, prior to 1961, strikingly similar to that now going on in the Congo. Americans were being used only in back-up operations, and in flying supplies to beleaguered troops.

Even after the U.S. commitment three years ago — and, in fact, even today—these Americans in Viet Nam are still labeled “advisors”. The government is perpetuating the fiction that Americans are taking no part in combat in Viet Nam. To the 21,000 American soldiers now in that Southeast Asian nation, and to the families of the 200 Americans killed, this distinction must be thin, indeed.

### ***Should Advisers Fight?***

The question which may soon have to be answered by the administration's military thinkers is how far U.S. support to the Congolese army should go. Should, for example, the Americans fire back if fired on while aiding the Congo army? Should American pilots fly Congolese troops only to airfields, or should they parachute them into combat areas? Will American aid extend to “advising” troops while on combat duty? And if so should these “advisors” be armed with instructions to direct actual fighting strategy?”

These questions are vital; for affirmative answers may irretrievably pull us into another limited, difficult, dirty war. It is generally acknowledged that the United States badly misread the political and military facts of life in Viet Nam. Consequently, American prestige is on the line in a guerrilla war almost impossible to win, in a nation whose political instability is a crucial obstacle to effective fighting.

Clearly the Congo has neither a stable government nor an effective fighting force. Just as clearly the northern rebels pose a threat to the central government: a threat made even more ominous by Chinese subversion.

The United States thus has an obligation to start thinking now about what it wants in the Congo, and what it plans to do in the military field. If our government simply extends itself piecemeal, we may find ourselves fighting another “non-war” in a hostile climate for a government without effective control over its own government. It is this grim possibility which makes the comic-operatics of the Congo a potential prologue to tragedy.