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U.S. Role Seen in Philippine Politics

In Manila, Only Argument Is Over Whom U.S. Secretly Backs

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MANILA—U.S. Ambassador Stephen W. Bosworth had just finished speaking before a business group here last month when the inevitable question came up: Could he please comment on the persistence in the Philippines' internal affairs?

"You know, we're damned if we do and damned if we don't, in the very real sense," Bosworth replied. "We are accused of interfering if we do nothing." Then the normally low-key envoy burst into an uncharacteristic denunciation of Filipino politicians who "find it somehow politically expedient to raise the specter of American interventionism" as a way to "explain their own personal and individual failures."

Bosworth's unusual remarks reflected official American frustration and sensitivity over the widespread perception here that whatever happens in Philippine politics, the U.S. government is somehow covertly involved. It is a view no longer exclusive to the radical left, but one that has gained wide acceptance among commentators, politicians and even impartial diplomats based here.

Theories of U.S. interference conflict. The president's brother-in-law, Agapito (Butz) Aquino, told reporters last month that the CIA might be behind a then current wave of bombings and killings in an effort to destabilize President Corason Aquino.

On the opposite side, the normally sober newspaper Business Day ran an article based on anonymous "informed sources" alleging that CIA operatives were in the country last month trying to boost Aquino's beleaguered government.

Suspensions of unseen American involvement in Philippine politics are so pervasive as to be almost comical. When an American correspondent recently visited an Asian diplomat for an unrelated interview,

the diplomat closed his office door and questioned the reporter about everything he knew of any covert American role.

Bosworth has used a series of public forums around town to deny American "interventionism at the microcosmic level."

Yet he managed to raise even more suspicions when he told the business group that while the United States had not interfered in recent domestic developments, "any attempt to change the government through force or the threat of force would have had certain inevitable consequences in our bilateral relationship." Some western and Asian diplomats called that phrase unusual for an envoy to make, and possibly suggestive of a larger U.S. role than officially acknowledged.

The ever-present suspicion of an American hand shaping events is born out of the sometimes sullied history of U.S. intervention in the affairs of its former colony. The most obvious instance was the 1953 successful presidential campaign of Ramon Magsaysay, who received financing and public relations advice from the CIA and the American military.

Backing by successive U.S. presidents helped sustain Ferdinand Marcos' regime to the end. In late 1985, it was CIA director William J. Casey and Sen. Paul Laxalt (R-Nev.), personal emissary of President Reagan, who first broached to Marcos the idea of calling a "snap" presidential election with U.S. observers present. And, according to Laxalt's account, it was he who later suggested to Marcos that he announce the election on David Brinkley's television show.

At the height of last February's revolution, it was Laxalt again who telephoned Marcos with the message that the United States now wanted him to "cut and cut clean." The Americans provided the plane that took him to Hawaii.

Since February, after withdrawing support from Marcos and rec-

ognizing Aquino as president, the Reagan administration has become the Aquino government's biggest cheerleader. Yet that support has left critics from the left and right—as well as many neutral observers—openly questioning how far the Americans can and will go in covertly stage-managing events to shore up Aquino's government in times of crisis.

"The nationalist feeling—that is, opposition to American interference—seems stronger these days," said one Asian diplomat. "Even the intellectuals are more sensitive about American involvement in Philippine affairs."

A western diplomat generally dismissed suggestions of American meddling, saying, "It's really Filipinos trying to spread disinformation and apprehension by asking where were the Americans."

This diplomat suggested that since the Philippines' own politics is rife with Marcos-style subterfuge, manipulation and byzantine plotting, people here assume that other countries, specifically the Americans, operate by the same rules. "A lot of that thinking grows out of a real inability of many people to understand politics," he said.

"The role of the Americans in our internal affairs is greatly exaggerated," said one palace official, deputy press spokesman Benedicto David. "Magsaysay was largely an American creation. I think everybody acknowledges that. So ever since then, the tendency is to blame the CIA for everything which goes on here, which is silly."

Suggestions that the United States is manipulating the Aquino government are particularly galling, he said, since the Americans continued to support Marcos over the opposition last February, even after widespread reports of electoral fraud. "She [Aquino] was largely the product of forces working against American interests," David said.

Others resent the implication in the charges that the Americans—not the Filipino people's much-vaunted "people power" revolution—were ultimately responsible for forcing Marcos to leave.

But the belief in American intervention, whether correct or not, still colors U.S.-Philippine relations on a number of bilateral issues, such as the future of American military bases.

Last month's dramatic politics here sharpened the debate over U.S. involvement. While a wave of violence seemed aimed at destabilizing Aquino's government, armed forces chief Gen. Fidel Ramos presented Aquino with reports of a coup plot by officers loyal to Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile.

As Aquino fired Enrile and reshuffled her Cabinet, newspaper headlines here reflected popular suspicions, reading: "U.S. Manipulators Involved in Enrile's Ouster?" "Enrile, Ramos Met Secretly With U.S. Officials" and "CIA Hand in RP Seen." (RP stands for the Republic of the Philippines.)

American officials, led by Bosworth, adamantly denied any involvement in the events, but a growing body of opinion holds that Aquino's moves at least carried the White House seal of approval.

Conspiracy theorists here disagree, though, over whom Washington would have been supporting or why.

The Americans were thought to be quietly encouraging Enrile when he began escalating his public criticisms of Aquino. Enrile's strident anticommunism and skepticism about Aquino's peace talks with communist insurgents were seen as more in tune with the Reagan administration's own thinking.

But when Aquino fired Enrile, a new theory accused the Americans

of orchestrating his ouster before he went too far in destabilizing Aquino. This view, that Washington was working covertly to aid Aquino in her confrontation with Enrile, seemed supported by news leaks that the Justice Department was probing a possible diversion by Enrile of U.S. aid money.

News accounts of the investigation, published as Enrile intensified his criticism of Aquino, prompted some of his backers to accuse the United States of undermining him. The theory was fueled in recent weeks by news reports of American visitors.

Ray Cline, a former CIA deputy director, and retired Gen. Robert Schweitzer came here last month to advise Enrile against a coup, although Cline said he was not traveling as a U.S. official.

The Philippine News Agency, quoting unnamed military sources, reported that Philip C. Habib, President Reagan's diplomatic troubleshooter, was here on an "unofficial mission" days before the coup plot was exposed, but Bosworth denied that Habib had been in the Philippines during the crisis.

Also, Bosworth did confirm that retired Maj. Gen. John K. Singlaub, president of the World Anti-Communist League, was in the Philippines as a "private citizen," but there was no indication of exactly when he came or what he did.

The public view that America was involved also grows from the American connections of many top political players here, particularly military officers who studied at West Point. Leftists particularly believe that Gen. Ramos and the new defense minister, Rafael Ileto, are closely linked to America and supportive of U.S. security interests here—specifically the retention of Clark Air Base and Subic Bay Naval Station.