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U.S. Panama Policy 'Silly'? What Policy, Mr. Fulbright?

WASHINGTON (AP)—In dismissing U.S. policy on Panama as "silly," J. William Fulbright, Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman, has predictably—even if unintentionally—caused a new delay in a canal treaty settlement, according to the diplomatic grapevine.

For Fulbright's criticisms have stiffened the Panamanian position causing the always touch-and-go chances of a meeting of minds with Washington to recede once again.

Panamanian President Chiari is now said to believe that pressure from such powerful citizens as Sen. Fulbright will compel President Johnson to come much closer to an agreement on Panamanian terms—that there will be no renewal of diplomatic relations unless the United States agrees unconditionally to tear up the old canal treaty of 1903 and write a completely new one.

Aside from illustrating the penalties of too many foreign policy cooks, this Panamanian misinterpretation of the causes and effects of presidential decisions is doubly unfortunate because Mr. Johnson is totally unmoved by the Fulbright attack.

The President simply considers it an assault on a policy that does not exist. Fulbright, for instance, said that it was "silly" for the United States to treat its dispute with tiny Panama as "a test of our courage and resolve." But the point is that none in the Johnson administration would quarrel with Fulbright on this point, except to say that it is knocking down a straw man.

"COURAGE and resolve" is not the issue in Panama. The issue involves the question: Would it be wise for the United States to make major concessions under pressure of January's massive rioting, arson, shooting, which was deliberately supported by the ruling oligarchs of Panama, including President Chiari, who, when the Castroites took over the mobs, proved too weak and scared to put out the fires the oligarchs themselves had helped to start.

The United States has the goods, but cold, on Chiari due to the tape recordings which monitored his orders to the Panamanian national guard to stay in their barracks and let the mobs loot and burn at will.

There is also the matter of the incitement to riot dinned incessantly over Panamanian television and radio stations owned by Chiari and other oligarchs.

The fact that Panama is little does not make the oligarchs less responsible for the January havoc that could not have ensued without their collaboration, nor does it make the Panamanian Castroites less cocky and dangerous now that they are in a position to intimidate their irresponsible government.

The United States clearly made a mistake in letting American students at Balboa High school violate regulations by raising the American flag without the Panamanian flag. But one mistake does not always deserve another, and the consequences of making con-

cessions at riot point—riots out of all proportion to the provocation—would unleash a chain of similar riots everywhere in Latin America where something more was wanted of Uncle Sam.

AS TO Sen. Fulbright's contention that there is nothing sacred about the Panama Canal treaty, who in the Johnson administration ever said there was? President Johnson has offered to review and make accommodations in the 1903 treaty even if he will not, under present conditions, be bound in advance to specific concessions.

Any treaty granting rights "in perpetuity" to another country is a thorny issue. The Philippines is a good example of a case where the United States voluntarily put a time limit on its treaty and set a date for its exit.

Fortunately for the Philippines, it was not at that time involved in the cold war and Panama is. For one thing, the 1903 treaty of Panama was obtained on much the same conditions that governed the U.S. treaty with Cuba giving this country in effect rights in perpetuity to the naval base at Guantanamo.

And whereas there are many officials here who in abstract think it would be a fine idea to put a fixed date on giving the canal to Panama, they think twice about it under present realities which are that this would certainly lead to similar demands from Castro for a new treaty on Guantanamo.

In point of fact, when the oratory dies and the flag waving stops, Panamanians will say privately that they are more interested in economic benefits—greater share of canal tolls, better wages, etc.—than control anytime soon of a canal that they freely admit they cannot run.

And that is precisely what President Johnson is prepared to agree to—if the Panamanians will stop trying to prove to the hemisphere that the way to get things out of Uncle Sam is by bigger and better riots and impossible demands and ultimata.