

Danger in Yemen

The attention being paid to the half-war in Yemen in today's Times is due to a foreseeable climax. When the British get out of Aden and the South Arabian Federation next year, a major struggle is inevitable if the intricate maneuvering now going on continues.

Since the glittering prize on the horizon is the oil of the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf, this is a conflict that involves the United States, Britain and France. A part of the prize could be command of the Middle East, which affects historic Russian dreams and even Chinese Communist machinations.

This was a magician's trick of history. When Imam al-Badr was overthrown four and a half years ago in his isolated, feudalistic, poverty-stricken kingdom that belonged back in the Middle Ages, the possibilities were so murky that the Kennedy Administration quickly recognized the newly formed republican government in Sana.

President Nasser of Egypt was even quicker to support the republican regime, but in those days he was getting American aid and seemed the progressive, dynamic, modern voice of the Arab world. Ironically, as the Egyptians got sucked into Yemen deeper and deeper, pouring in advisers, troops, planes, money, Yemen became known as "Nasser's Vietnam."

Now it is possible that the Egyptian President's investment may pay off. There has been a relative cease-fire since August, 1965, but the forces and pressures are building up again. Neighboring Saudi Arabia, monarchistic, traditional and wealthy, had immediately sided with the Imam of Yemen. But the republicans, even with a great occupying force of Egyptians, could not conquer the north and drive the royalists out.

So the struggle is essentially between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, with Yemen as a battleground. One of the ironies is that the United States helped the republicans and therefore President Nasser, whose ambition is some day to control the oil of Saudi Arabia which, in turn, represents a huge American investment of great strategic importance.

It is as futile to say "Leave Yemen alone," as it is to say "Leave Vietnam alone." Pawns are sacrificed in power politics, as in chess. In present circumstances, the best hope seems to be to work for a stalemate, with Yemen divided into a royalist north and a republican south.