



Marginalia

EDITORIALS OPINION TRAVEL ETCETERA LETTERS



Opinion:



PRESIDENTIAL PAPERS

by Marcus Raskin

RAMPARTS' Contributing Editor Marcus Raskin has been in a unique position to observe the gradual changes in U. S. foreign policy that have led to our present involvement in Vietnam.

The editors consider Mr. Raskin's memoirs of Washington decision-making, and the editorial observations he makes on the meaning of those decisions, required reading for Americans concerned with the present drift of our policies.

THIS IS A personal memoir of the hardening of attitudes in official Washington which led the United States into a war in Asia. I first became aware of those attitudes during the early days of the Kennedy Administration, while working as a member of the Special Staff of the National Security Council. I found myself in a good position to assess changes in Vietnam policies at the White House level. As a result of differences over policy I left the government in 1963. But I continued to talk and exchange memos with many people involved in the making of national security policy.

During the first months of the new Administration I witnessed one briefing which indicated what those interested in peace would be up against. In the spring of 1961, a meeting was arranged by the President with the governors

civil defense committee. It began with a briefing by a deputy director of the CIA. The level was about equal to the editorials in the New York Daily News. The substance of the briefing was on how many village chiefs were being killed in Laos and more generally in the Southeast Asian area. It was typical of so many government briefings I had attended in which only one part of a complex political situation was given. In that regard the analysis of current political history in organizations is similar to a one-man game of chess. After the briefing was finished, Governor Rockefeller made a comment which suggested the level of political sophistication in high circles about guerrilla war and revolution. He remarked, "Those dirty guys in Asia, why don't they fight fair?" At that time Vietnam was a back burner affair, and little more. The Rostow-Taylor theories of counter-insurgency were soon to put to a test the American meaning of fair fighting.

In the fall of 1961, President Kennedy sent those two estimable gentlemen to Vietnam. They reported back with a plan for rather substantial intervention. President Kennedy accepted their advice. By so doing he accepted the view that small scale military involvements would be fought for military advantages. This idea was not generally accepted by our military leaders who were against intervention unless large scale military commitments were given. "Those guys," as one of my former White House colleagues said to me, "want a signed blank check in advance to bomb Peking just because the President wants to put our finger in the dikes over in Vietnam and Thailand." There were few people around Washington in the early Kennedy days who knew where our intervention could lead us. Senator Morse had foresight of course, and there was also the wise and good gentleman Benjamin V. Cohen, the former counselor of the

Department of State. But very few listened to them.

In retrospect, the evidence suggests that President Kennedy eventually recognized his mistake. In October of 1963, the White House issued a cryptic one-page statement after McNamara and Taylor returned from Vietnam. After stating that major assistance was needed only until the insurgency was suppressed, the statement went on to say, "Secretary McNamara and General Taylor reported their judgment that the major part of the U.S. military task can be completed by the end of 1965, although there may be a continuing requirement for a limited number of U.S. training personnel. They reported that by the end of this year (1963), the U.S. program for training Vietnamese should have progressed to the point where 1000 U.S. military personnel assigned to South Vietnam can be withdrawn." As Arthur Schlesinger later said, President Kennedy realized that he had made a bad judgment in Vietnam and the U.S. had to find an honorable way to extricate itself.

AFTER THE SHOCK of President Kennedy's assassination began to wear off, many people in the Administration wondered if Johnson would not also take the route of reducing international tensions and ending the intervention in Asia. I, for one, was somewhat sanguine. President Johnson proposed a strategic vehicle cutback, cut down the defense budget and arranged for a 25 per cent reduction in the production of weapons grade uranium, a step which President Kennedy had intended only after the 1964 elections. While Johnson was a majority leader of the Senate he had told Dulles and Eisenhower that the United States should not send American boys to die in Indochina. There seemed to be, at the beginning of the Johnson Administration, a turning inward, a desire to cope with problems at home. By shift-

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ing a billion dollars from the defense budget to the new anti-poverty program, Johnson seemed to be ushering in a new era.

However, Johnson was an untested President who had an upcoming election to face in which his probable opponent made it clear that withdrawal from Vietnam, or a negotiated settlement, would mean selling out. To speak to that political need President Johnson began speaking of Vietnam in the mock heroics of Prime Minister Churchill. The war hawks continued planning and working.

The Johnson Administration's plans for the bombing of North Vietnam were set in the early spring of 1964. What was needed, it was felt, was a showpiece execution of those plans. With this, the President could satisfy both the Republican "non-partisan" who liked "toughness" and the U.S. Air Force which wanted to bomb the North Vietnamese "back to the Stone Age." That required an event, real or manufactured, for the bombings. The Gulf of Tonkin incident provided the excuse to bomb North Vietnamese oil dumps and harbors.

C DURING THE Presidential election period in 1964 it was rumored that various feelers were put out by the North Vietnamese and that contacts had developed between various elements of the NLF and the Quat government. Various official intelligence estimates doubted the ability of the South Vietnamese government to last very long and recommended that the United States negotiate its way out of that unhappy land. The CIA, obviously with White House backing, put out such a paper in August 1964, which had the general approval of the National Board of Intelligence Estimates. That position, as the New York Times pointed out, was "widely held" in the government.

The Johnsonians did not want to consider these questions until the Presidential campaign was out of the way. Once it was and the North Vietnamese continued to make their contacts, the President, my White House contacts said, was too tired to concern himself with the Vietnamese diplomatic negotiations. In December of 1964, American forces in the field asked for direc-

tion. Reports from Vietnam were made to the Department of State in the late fall of 1964, which left the Washington insiders with the conviction that the United States was either about to "lose" South Vietnam to the rebels or was about to create a coalition government which would include the NLF. Presentation of these stark choices to the Washington bureaucracy, the White House staff, Departments of State and Defense, and finally, the President, meant that the United States would either have to get in or get out. "Getting in" meant taking over the bulk of the fighting from the South Vietnamese army and turning South Vietnam into a staging area for American military power. Where, until the fall of 1964, the United States acted primarily as advisors to the South Vietnamese, it would now have to be the other way; as the NLF predicted, the South Vietnamese would end up as advisors to the Americans.

But late in the fall of 1964, it seemed there was still hope. President Johnson won the election on a peace platform and his instincts about land wars seemed good. More important, he knew Washington where great careers are built by compounding failure. I began to send memos to various people who had access to the President. In one memorandum I said that "in Washington careers are built by men who objectify their errors of judgment and venality into 'situations' and 'problems' which then appear to require that we retain only those people who created these problems."

In a memo which I sent to an assistant secretary of State, I urged that the President sack the national security bureaucracy leaders who formulated the Vietnam policy because they were incompetent and morally primitive, end the bombings and the torture system, reconvene the Geneva Conference to negotiate out of Vietnam and start a regional development project for all of Indochina. His response was utterly wooden and rigid and typified the world view of more and more of the policy advisors who were moving up in the new Administration. I quote it in part:

Let me only say that no American has condoned or assisted in torture at any time, or in the use of napalm

except against what are believed to be valid military targets. *Unquestionably, the war is ugly, and Asian standards in its conduct are not always our own.* I would feel happier, however, if you addressed yourself with equal vigor to the morality of Hanoi's conduct throughout, including its assassinations and atrocities, not to mention the small point that what has been taking place for many years has clearly been a deliberate course of subversion and aggression, which would have happened if the Diem regime had been impeccable. If you dispute this, we are indeed on different wave lengths. Your whole handling of this aspect reminded me all too painfully of attitudes in Europe in the 1930's that equated every police measure by Benes against the Sudetans morally to the whole course of Hitler's conduct. Someday I shall write a piece on what might be called the "extreme liberal syndrome" and its usefulness, or otherwise, in foreign affairs.

By February 7, 1965, the United States used the Viet Cong guerrilla raid at Pleiku as its excuse to bomb North Vietnam. This was to become a common habit of the Johnson Administration in which events were used as the ostensible reason for undertaking actions that were already intended. Members of the White House staff told me that McGeorge Bundy, who was sent to South Vietnam to find a way out, "blew his cool" at Pleiku. The plans for a further escalation of the war had already been laid because South Vietnamese military morale was at low ebb and this was thought to be a way to save the sinking Saigon government. These plans were reinforced by Mr. Bundy when he saw the damage caused at Pleiku by the Viet Cong. The only military and political plan which had currency at the time was to bomb North Vietnam even though its relation to events in South Vietnam was tenuous. For Bundy and other Johnson advisors, Pleiku became the emotional rationale for carrying out the American plan to bomb the North.

C IN FEBRUARY 1965, I met with a group of 35 congressmen to discuss diplomatic opportunities for getting out of the war. The con-

gressmen at that February meeting, conservatives and liberals alike, wanted to end the war as quickly as possible. They did not see any purpose to the American policy. Furthermore, there was a serious crisis of credibility.

One congressman, a former intelligence officer, said that the briefings given by the Department of State and Defense were "worthless." Either they lied or they were stupid. In any case, the Executive Departments could not be trusted. (Fewer and fewer congressmen came to State Department briefings because the "Department" people are not believed.)

I took part in a teach-in in May 1965, with the then counselor of the Department of State, Walt Rostow, now a member of the White House staff. He talked about the pre-1919 days with admiration for the stable international system which existed then. And in a way he was right about that stability. It was a time in the history of mankind when everyone knew his place and stability was a "permanent" condition—for the master and slave. Now, he said, we were trying to come to grips with re-erecting a new stability system. "Stemming Communist aggression" in Vietnam was the way to do it.

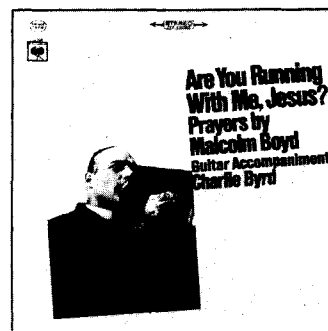
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Prayers like these don't happen often. They ought to.



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I stated that our foreign policy emerged out of a crisis of judgment in which our leaders seemed unable to distinguish the important from the unimportant: an inevitable disease of empires. The militarization of American foreign policy where force seemed to become our principal method of handling disputes reduced itself to the method of breaking the "enemy's" will. American policy makers with unbelievable military power at their disposal thought that they had mastered the art of threat and brinkmanship. They saw their finest hour as the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, when the people of the world became their pawns in the game of nuclear chicken.

One day last year I had lunch with an eminent Administration advisor and modern day Mandarin who often writes on international affairs. He expressed the view that if we were to negotiate or withdraw or end the war in Vietnam it would be Munich all over again. For him any issue which involved front page confrontation between west and east always had elements of Munich in it if there was any possibility of settlement. His historical perspective was defined and limited to the eight-year period of 1931-1939, when the United States and the Western democracies, as the story goes, should have intervened against German aggression. The perspective of his generation in which I would also include Rusk, McNamara, Bundy, and Rostow, was set in the 1931-1939 period. They believe that Munich is *their* authentic reality. It is their history.

My intellectual friend was not moved or persuaded by anything except the need to stand firm and slug it out. Indeed, if that was the way the world was, so be it. We had "world responsibility," and to paraphrase President Johnson, we didn't ask to be the guardians at the gate but there we were. I said to my Mandarin friend that the United States was indiscriminately bombing villages and high density population areas. He said that was not our policy and challenged me to prove it. I averred that whether or not that was the intention, that is, in fact, what happened. He disagreed vociferously. At that time it seemed that the facts had not caught up with the truth. The truth and the facts are now remarkably clear.

WHILE VIETNAM was ravaged, ideologues of the government whom I debated said that the issue was not Vietnam but China. Were we going to stand by while China "took over" Vietnam and Southeast Asia and started wars of national liberation? Dean Rusk believed that the Chinese intended to plant the seeds of wars of national liberation, cultivate them, make them grow and then reap the harvest. Consequently, it became the job of the United States to defoliate, destroy the seeds, and ultimately rip them up by their roots. Members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff favored "having it out" with China now before they became too powerful in terms of nuclear weapons. They drew Rusk's logic to its military conclusion.

Fitting Chinese actions into the American ideological box was a hard thing to do. After all, there were no Chinese troops in any part of Vietnam. It was the United States that bombed near Chinese borders and Chinese fishing vessels. Statements about Chinese interest in conquering the world made by various responsible officials were justified by misreading the Lin Piao statement. It became my opinion that the American diplomatic and military objective in Vietnam was the military and diplomatic interdiction of China. Government policy makers talked about Chinese intentions as a rationalization for what *they* wanted to do. At first China was out to conquer the world and they had to be "stopped" at all costs. Then the line changed. China was weak and would not respond to American bombing of North Vietnam. Consequently, we could do what we wanted to on China's borders.

One could never be sure at what point American policy would by its own actions bring about the type of Chinese expansion in Southeast Asia that the United States feared. American policy makers would be acquitted in their judgment to expand and intensify their war in Asia if the Chinese entered Southeast Asia. What could be a better answer from Dean Rusk to Senator Fulbright than pointing to Chinese military intervention? That indeed would be personal vindication. We would have found an objective equal to our commitment.

We have become the New Imperial-

ists and it is a heady thing. Ironically there is a crackpot idealist strain to our foreign policy. President Johnson, Humphrey, McNamara, Rusk, et al., now argue that those who are opposed to fighting in Vietnam are racists. They say that all men are brothers whatever their color and we must help them either with napalm or roads. We believe in power, technique, righteousness and fear as our tools. If only we could be judged by our intentions and not by our behavior everything would be just fine. If only "they" would let us use our "wheels and gears" for them. Unfortunately, it is the oppressed who judge the oppressor. Not the other way.

The world knows that we can destroy Vietnam and China, but they also see that the stench is in our land and the souls which need redeeming are our own.



OF FISH AND FISHERMEN

by Howard Zinn

THERE IS AN eerie ten minute motion picture called "The Fisherman," in which a happy American wrangler hauls sleek, fat, leaping fish out of the ocean and piles them lifeless on the beach, meanwhile devouring candy bars from his lunchbox. He finally runs out of food. Restless, unhappy, he sees a paper sack nearby with a sandwich in it, bites into the sandwich, and is hooked. He digs his feet frantically into the sand, but he is dragged, twisting and struggling at the end of a line, into the sea. The effect on the viewer is a sudden reversal of perspective, both horrifying and healthful, in which, for the first time, he sees himself, the Fisherman, from